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AUNT NABBY'S CHILDREN

BY FRANCES HODGES WHITE

COSY • CORNER • SERIES



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AUNT NABBY'S CHILDREN

Works of
Frances Hodges White

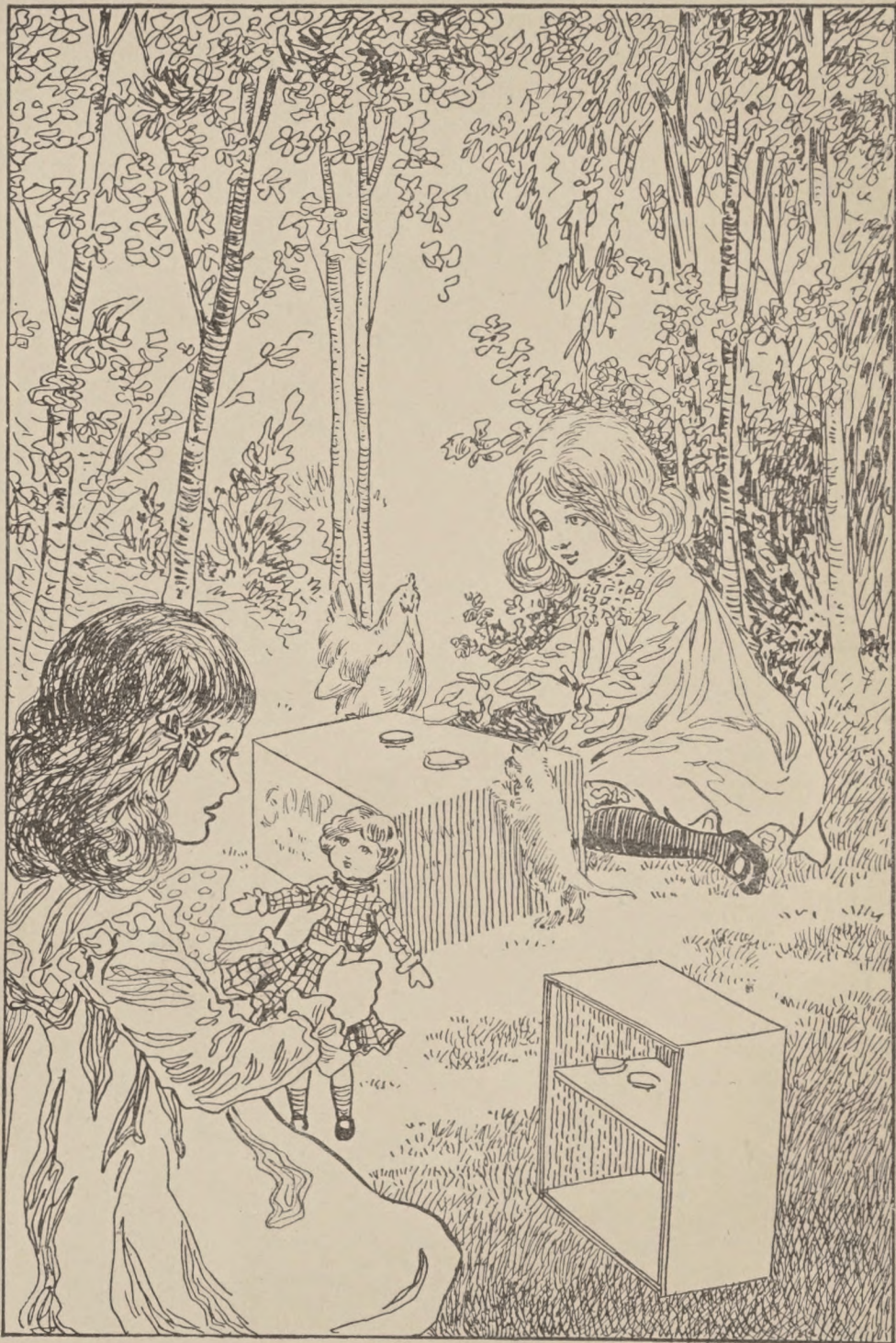


Helena's Wonderworld

Aunt Nabby's Children



L. C. PAGE & COMPANY
200 Summer Street, Boston, Mass.



THE DINNER PARTY.

(See page 46).

Cosy Corner Series

AUNT NABBY'S
CHILDREN

By ✓

Frances Hodges White

Author of "Helena's Wonderland"

Illustrated by

Wallace Goldsmith



Boston ❀ ❀ ❀ ❀ ❀

L. C. Page & Company

❀ ❀ ❀ ❀ ❀ 1901

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AUNT NABBY'S CHILDREN.

CHAPTER I.

AUNT NABBY lived in the little wood-coloured house at the summit of the hill from which the winding village road led down to Putnam Mills.

To visitors entering the town it was a matter of wonder where the settlement got the plural ending to its name, for the only mill of which it could boast was a single sawmill that sang lazily all the summer days, sending its soothing murmur up the hill to greet Aunt Nabby. It sounded for all the world like a great contented bumblebee droning his flight from flower to flower, and causing Aunt Nabby to drop stitches in her after-dinner knitting; then it lulled her head into sudden bows and jerks, which she would be loth to confess, even to the great poppies and hollyhocks in her garden,

that bowed and nodded back to her while she slept.

If it was doubtful where the village got its name, then it was almost as much so how Aunt Nabby came by hers. Those who had known her long and intimately spoke the name tenderly, and allowed it to linger on their tongues as if it brought pleasant memories with it. They had almost forgotten that she had been christened Nancy Abby Pameley Quest, but they would have told the stranger that her father, whose idol she had been, had blessed her with the name of Abby, and that the mother had given the child her own favourite name of Nancy; and so to one she was always Nancy, and to the other she remained Abby, till the poor child became so accustomed to this jumble of names that she answered to both with equal promptness; but when asked her name by a stranger, she was so confused that she began with Nancy and ended up with Abby. The result was a compromise between her parents, and she became just plain Nabby, and remained so till she had reached middle life, and had grown so dear to every heart in the village, and had taken them all into her own great heart so fully, that

she was Aunt Nabby to every living thing, from the parson of the little white church down to the fluffy yellow chickens running about her garden.

Aunt Nabby was of medium height, with a head of long, brown, pipe-stem curls, that hung about her shoulders, and formed a fitting background for her large dark eyes, which were meltingly tender when she looked at things she loved, and grew fiercely black when the one professed object of her hatred — "Square Sslib" — drove past the house in his two-wheeled sulky.

She was out in the garden now, working among her flowers and herbs, and talking to herself as usual. As she stooped to sniff a bush of wild southernwood, a short dark curl fell over her forehead, and covered caressingly a small wen that protruded just above her left eye, and was the one burden of grief which she carried locked in her proud old heart. She smiled faintly now, and pushed back the curl almost impatiently.

Aunt Nabby was exactly like her father, and the wen on her forehead was the one thing inherited from him of which she was not proud. He had been known in the town as "Square"

Quest, despite the round roly-poly little form, and the three straight tiers of double chin, which he had handed down to Aunt Nabby, and which lay in soft folds on her generous breast, covering almost entirely the pure white handkerchief and huge cameo pin which she always wore. In fact, everything about Aunt Nabby was generous, even to her purse strings, that seemed to untie themselves at sight of want or suffering. But the most attractive thing about her was her voice, which was low, pure, and clear when she spoke, and made us love her whether we would or not.

It was whispered about the village that Aunt Nabby had been the heroine of a love-affair in her girlhood, but no living mortal had ever dared to lisp a word of it to her. Each knew, however, beyond a doubt, that the reason of her seeming hatred of "Square Sslib" was that she had once loved him, and found him false, and now to her "a sterner thing than hate, was love grown cold," and she frowned only when he passed the house, or took part in the village prayer-meeting.

But if Heaven had denied her a husband and little flock of her own, it seemed to have

done so wisely, for the arrangement had left her ample time to look after the desolate homes, and hungry, uncared-for flocks of others in the village.

There were several strongly marked traits in her character, and among these were the love of flowers and herbs, her passion for poetry, and her professed hatred of Squire Sslib — and spiders.

She brushed the curl again impatiently from her forehead, and looked up with startled eye to see who was scaring her favourite speckled hen, that came running into the yard with wide-stretched wings, and loud squawkings at the dust which pursued her, and covered Aunt Nabby's bright black merino.

Squire Sslib was driving past in his two-wheeled gig, and Nabby turned a wrathful countenance from him, and walked toward the house.

“The sinful old spider,” she said aloud, “if I could ketch him, I'd give him a dose er worm-wood and gall; 'twouldn't be no bitterer'n some er the tricks he's played on other folks,” and she gave her sunbonnet strings such a jerk that they seemed to jump with Aunt Nabby at the

sound of a silvery-toned little voice, speaking close beside her, and saying :

“How do yer do, missis, can't you tell me what's your name?”

Aunt Nabby thought the wee voice had dropped from the skies, but when she turned around she saw a real live little girl standing in the path just inside the gate. She was so tiny that she looked to be not over four years of age, and as though she ought to be at home in her mother's arms, Aunt Nabby thought. But she stood quite unabashed, dividing her attentions between caressing a soft white kitten that she cuddled in her neck, and the glances which she bestowed upon Aunt Nabby, with great red-brown, wondering eyes. Her face was dirty and stained with blueberries, which she had evidently been eating by the roadside, and she carried a little covered basket hanging on her arm. Her hair fell about her face in showers of red-brown curls, that vied with the tint of her eyes, and seemed to hold all the light of the sunshine in their tangled rings. She wore ankle-ties that had seen their best days, and her pink chubby legs were bare, and covered with scratches. She had on a short flannel petticoat and a blue

checkered pinafore with its strings trailing behind her. A soft gray slouch hat, evidently her brother's, with the rim turned down, was drawn low over her ears, and all along the under edge of the brim butter cups were twined, and held in place by their stems, which were tucked under the hat crown. They fell about her face in a perfect halo of gold, blending with her eyes and hair in a glory that made Aunt Nabby catch her breath in delight, and answer the little maiden with as much courtesy as if she had been a grown-up woman.

"My name is Aunt Nabby, but who are you?"

"Kate."

"Kate what, and where do you live?"

"Jest plain Kate, an' I lives at the poor-farm."

Aunt Nabby smothered a little scream of horror and pursued her questioning.

"Don't know jest how long I've lived there," the child continued. "Joe can tell yer. Joe's my brother, an' I love him, I do. Ever been ter the poor-farm, Aunt Nabby?" and she spoke the name with a simple trust that went straight to Aunt Nabby's heart and found a home there for all the years to come.

“No, Kate, I hain't be'n there fer a long time.” She was eyeing the child with unusual interest now, which was answered in a consoling voice :

“Never been ter the farm? Well, I'm awful sorry for yer, yer ought to come up there an' live. It's a real nice place, where only aristocrats can live. Joe says so, anyway. 'Tain't called the poor-farm cause it's poor, did yer fink so? No, it's only cause it's named fer a man what used ter own the land, and his name was Fearful Poor. That's what Joe said! Say, Aunt Nabby, you look like a 'ristocrat; can't yer come up ter the poor-farm an' live if yer want ter?”

She looked up now under Aunt Nabby's sun-bonnet with her great trustful eyes, and said, in a faltering whisper :

“Say, Aunt Nabby, what's that big bunch on yer forehead?”

Aunt Nabby made a nervous clutch at the little curl and pulled it over the offending bump, and then she said :

“Lor' sakes! child, it's yaller dock *you* need; curiosity's in the blood, and petticoats don't make no difference; the short ones is jest as

curous as long ones, and yer need a dose er dock, as sure's the world, ter drive it out!" She looked with deep concern at Kate, who was busying herself now, trying to replace the cover on her basket.

"Say, yer don't know what I come over ter the store fer, do yer?"

Aunt Nabby's face softened again at the happy voice. "No, Kate, I don't."

"Well, yer see we been troubled a lot at the farm with mice, an' one mornin' when Joe gut up ter dress hissself, what do yer s'pose happened?" Here she went off into such a merry peal of laughter that the kitten in her arms looked frightened, and tried to get away.

"He don't like ter hear me talk about mices, does he?" and she patted him into purring once again. "Well, I was tellin' you that one mornin' when Joe got up, he went to the suller door ter get his trousers, and what do yer fink? When he went ter put his feet in, a wee wee little mousie jumped right out at him, an' run away! We tried ter ketch him, — but we didn't, — an' Joe said he wished we had a mouse-trap, an' so I jest started off ter buy one with the money Square Sslib give me last night."

Aunt Nabby's face grew crimson at sound of the Squire's name, but she made no reply, and the child continued :

"Say, who's your overseer? Is he Square Sslib? No? I'm awful sorry. He's awful nice, did yer know it? He comes ter see me, an' brings me candy, an' rocks me in his arms; oh! he's so nice, I love him next ter Joe."

This was almost too much for Aunt Nabby, who, trying to change the subject, broke in abruptly with the remark :

"Kate, you have a very dirty face, did you know it?"

"Have I? I washed it Sunday! Say, Aunt Nabby, does Square Sslib pay your rent and board when the monf is up, and have the walls round *your* bed whitewashed, an' — an' every-fing?"

"Hush, child! no, of course he don't; I have to do that myself."

The great brown eyes were raised to Aunt Nabby's face with a look of melting pity, as she said, in a voice that was hushed and sad: "Oh, I'm so sorry fer you; say, I'm awful sorry, an', if you say so, I'll go to see the Square this very day, and tell him ter come over here an' see



“‘THIS IS IT, HERE IN MY ARMS.’”

you. An' I'll tell him to bring you a stick er strip-ped candy — an' some big red apples, an' — an' — some copper-toed boots, an' I'll tell him ter rock you in his arms, jest like he does me — 'cause it's awful nice, an' you ain't ser very fat, Aunt Nabby, — no fatter'n he is, — an' say, you look somefin' like him !”

Aunt Nabby's face flushed, as if she had been broiling over a hot fire, but she only covered it with her sunbonnet, and stood resigned, as the child continued :

“ How many times a day can you have bread and 'lasses ? ”

“ Jest as often as I want it, but you surely must have a dose er yaller dock ! ”

“ Git any butter on yer bread, Aunt Nabby ? I do if I'm good, an' if I'm awful good, gooder'n the angels, or Joe, I get two plates er soup ! Say, you didn't say how you like my mouse-trap.”

“ I didn't see it,” came the reply, in a voice beginning to vibrate with unusual interest.

“ Yer didn't see it ? Why, yes yer did ; this is it, here in my arms. I give Mr. Store-keeper ten cents, an' asked him fer a mouse-trap, an' this is what he give me ; but he wouldn't stay

in the basket, an' so I jest carry him in my arms," and she nestled the kitty closer.

"Say, does the Square make you work fer your board? He used ter pay mine, but now he says I'm most old enough ter wash dishes fer it, an' he guesses he'll take me home an' let me help him; 'n' then he said the town's money was givin' out, an' he kissed me; but I sha'n't leave Joe, an' I won't budge an inch fer him, would you?"

Enough had been said, and Aunt Nabby, with one fell swoop, gathered Kate in her arms, and, bearing the struggling, writhing child into the house, closed the door behind her with a bang. "The sarsy old spider; how his mouth must taste after sech cruel words ter that blessed child. 'Twouldn't be wormwood I'd give him now, but I'd jest wash out his mouth with a good dose er sand an' soft soap, if I had a holt er him."

At first Kate resented Aunt Nabby's advances toward her, but when she looked about the kitchen, and felt the cool comfort of the room taking possession of her, she settled quietly down in the ample lap that was holding her, and went on with her questioning. Only

once for the whole day did she allow the sweet sunshine of her smile to be clouded, and that was when Aunt Nabby tried to wash her face before dinner. Then a fountain of tears was let loose, and mixed with the dust and grime on her cheeks, that afterward shone like the petals of a soft pink rose when Aunt Nabby had finished washing them. "But yer shouldn't ought ter done it," Kate persisted; "it ain't Sunday. Where be I goin', Aunt Nabby?" And she looked up through the tears with a happy smile again.

CHAPTER II.

“ Her hair is sunny and curly too,
Her cheeks are pink as a rose;
She has two eyes so soft and blue,
And a dear little turned up nose.”

THIS was Elizabeth, Aunt Nabby's small niece, who had been left a motherless child at two years of age, and who had found a home at Aunt Nabby's house, and a mother in her, ever since. She was now six summers old, and during all the time that Kate stood in the yard nestling the white kitten in her neck, Elizabeth was looking out with wondering eyes at the little stranger. “ Who could she be? and how she would love to have that precious kitten all her own self!” But when Kate came into the house struggling and crying in Aunt Nabby's arms, Beth thought wonders would never cease. She walked around the child several times, and made a mental note of the fact that “ she would be very pretty if only her face was clean.” And when this objection was removed, and she

learned that Kate was a homeless orphan, her own heart, which was growing to be full of kindness under the sunshine of Aunt Nabby's love, opened wide, and took in the little waif, and adopted her on the spot for her very own.

She danced around her lightly and kissed her on the cheek, and Kate pulled her flaxen curls and screamed with delight.

"Can't we keep her here with us, Aunt Nabby? Please do, I do so want a little sister," and she threw her arms around Aunt Nabby's neck and gave her a kiss on her cheek that settled the matter for ever, in the old lady's mind.

After dinner the sun went into a cloud, and Aunt Nabby looked down the hill toward the village with anxious eyes.

"They'll be missin' the child, and comin' after her," she said; and then turning to Elizabeth, she asked her if she thought she could take care of Kate for an hour, while she went to the poor-farm to make some inquiries about the little stranger. Beth was very sure she was perfectly well able to do so, and Aunt Nabby set out down the hill with the rain falling fast on her green umbrella.

It was a good mile walk to the poor-farm, but she covered the ground with rapid steps; and her face, although mild and dreamy by spells, for the most part was very firm. She had decided to adopt the child if she could get a "clear title" to her. When she reached the farm she found Joe with a white face and tear-stained eyes, searching about the house and barn, looking into the pig-pens, under the wood-piles, and even into the buttermilk-barrel and mustard box, for the little sister so dear to his heart, who had been away from him all that endless day. No one else there seemed at all disturbed. Joe had usually taken care of her, and they supposed he was doing so now.

Aunt Nabby learned that these two children had been at the farm since Kate was a baby, and the overseer told her, further, that no one knew who they were, or where they came from. It was said that one dreary stormy night in midwinter old Bob, the stage-driver, had left a woman and two children at the village tavern, where they took a room for the night. The boy seemed like one who had suffered a long illness, and realised nothing that was going on around him, and the baby was too small

either to see or care, and cried constantly for "Mamma." The woman with them appeared to be a maid or governess, and was very kind and patient to the children, but she pretended to be constantly watching the mail for a letter which did not come; and after three days of waiting, she hired a team from the stable "to drive to Rockland on important business," she said, and asked permission to leave the children with the landlady till her return, when she expected to bring their mother to join them. The horse was afterward found in a Waldoboro stable, but the woman was never seen or heard from again. The children were, for a time, kindly cared for by the good landlord of the hotel, but having a family of his own to support, the little strangers were finally located at the poor-farm, while a sharp lookout for the missing woman was kept by Bob, and, in fact, every member of the village who had seen her.

Aunt Nabby returned home with a sober face. She knew the old story of these strange children, but she was disappointed that Kate had proved to be one of them. Upon one thing, however, her mind was settled: she would keep the child, "title er no title!" Squire

Slilib should never have her. It seemed a pity to separate the brother and sister, but Joe could come every single day to see her if he wished, and so Kate's future was decided, and the bright sunshine of Aunt Nabby's heart shone out upon her life, and reflected its rays on every soul who looked into her sunny, twinkling eyes.

As for Elizabeth, she was supremely happy. Her daily prayer had been answered, and she was to have the little sister her heart so long had craved; and she proceeded to claim her in a sisterly way, that Kate, scarcely more than a babe, and devoted to her brother as she was, at once resented. But Elizabeth was not to be denied this long cherished hope, and she continued to call her "sister," and to watch over her carefully every hour of the day.

"Who do yer love, Kate?" she would say tenderly, throwing her arm around the child's neck, with the vain hope that she would reply, "You, sister;" but over and again she was disappointed, for Kate's only answer was:

"Jesus, of course!" Then Elizabeth's blue eyes would fill with tears, and she would insist:

"Yes, Kate, I know it, of course you do,

everybody loves Him, but who else do you love?"

"Jest Jesus an' Joe;" and Beth would hide her face in Aunt Nabby's shoulder to dry the tears of which she was ashamed.

If Aunt Nabby had decided for the hundredth time in her life to do a charitable act, it was evidently not to be a burden to her, for the love which she at once extended to the orphan child, made the care of her a delight rather than otherwise.

When she returned from the poor-farm it was nearly dark, and the two children were watching for her, with their faces pressed close against the window-pane, and at the first glimpse of her they ran out hand in hand to meet her.

"Did you see Joe, Aunt Nabby? where is he? why didn't you bring him?" and Kate burst into tears.

"He is a-comin' in the mornin', dear, after you have slept. He sent a kiss and his love to yer, and was very glad to hear that yer wus safe."

"But where's the kiss, Aunt Nabby, and where's the love? Why don't you give them to me, and what did you bring them in? You might

have had my little basket, and oh, why didn't I send Joe the mouse-trap!"

The rain had cleared, and a soft twilight was falling in the little kitchen as the happy children entered with Aunt Nabby. Kate's kitty was fast asleep on the rug in front of the table, and Kate, already tired, stretched herself beside it, and fell fast asleep also. It was with difficulty that they aroused her to eat supper, after which she cuddled in Aunt Nabby's arms and almost fell asleep before she could undress her.

"Say yer prayer now, Kate," Aunt Nabby crooned, "and then we'll go right away ter dreamland."

"What shall I say? I don't know any prayer; what is it?"

Elizabeth and Aunt Nabby exchanged horrified glances, but the latter said: "Isn't there somethin', Kate, yer would like ter say ter God, before yer go ter sleep? Some one yer would like ter ask Him ter take care of through the night?"

"Yes, there's Joe. What shall I say?"

"Jest what yer want ter, beginnin' with 'Dear Jesus,' and then askin' Him fer anything yer want."

But Kate was too far on the road to dream-land to think much about praying as she began :

“Dear Jesus, won't you please bless Joe fer me, and — and — say, they's a lot er fings I'd like ter say to you, God, but please do it all fer me without my asking, 'cause Kate's so tired,” and almost before the words had left her lips, her eyes were closed and she was resting trustingly on Aunt Nabby's breast, with Joe and the poor-farm far away.

“She's a queer child,” Aunt Nabby said, as she kissed her cheek and laid her tenderly on her own pillow. “She's as playful an' gentle as that little white kitten, but she can be as peppery, too, I dare say. I meant ter have give her a dose er yaller dock ter-night, but mebby mornin'll do jest as well,” and she bustled about to wash the tea things, and start a fire in the open fireplace, for the evening was cool.

At length, when her work was done, Aunt Nabby sat down before the fire, and, rocking herself steadily, gazed into the burning embers with empty hands. It was quite unusual for her to sit without her knitting work, but to-

night she was agitated, and forgot everything save the feeling of Kate's soft baby head nestling against her breast. "She's ser little," she said aloud, but Beth was buried in her primer and was deaf to all sounds. "Yes, she's ser little," Aunt Nabby continued, "an' ser pritty, it's no wonder the Squire wants her hisself! but he won't git her!" and then she fell to dreaming again. The bright golden locks had twined themselves around her heart, and Aunt Nabby was wondering if all mothers loved their children as she loved these two little girls, and what it really would mean to have a baby head all her own nestling on her shoulder.

She turned to an old secretary standing across the corner of the kitchen, and, opening its green curtained doors, took out a scrap-book of unusual dimensions. She always read poetry when stirred by any unusual emotions, and now she read aloud in her soft musical voice, after searching some time for these particular verses :

" " We are here on the borders of Rock-a-by Lake,
Dolly, and baby, and I ;
From afar on its bosom, dreams beckon my babe,
And the waves mirror stars in the sky.

“ ‘ But the night has long closed around Rock-a-by Lake,
 And the stars on its bosom still shine ;
 And its dreams beckon on, while the world beckons me,
 Yet my baby's eyes laugh into mine.’ ”

A little chuckle made Aunt Nabby shut her book in surprise, for close beside her stood Kate looking up at her with great wondering eyes. “ Go on, please, Aunt Nabby,” she said. “ Don't stop. I like that, an' Joe likes it, too. Here's you' baby, Aunt Nabby, but where's the dolly? an' here's the rock-a-by,” placing her hand on the chair, “ but where's the lake? Please say some more,” and she climbed into Aunt Nabby's lap and opened the book before her.

The words seemed to take on a deeper meaning as the happy woman, rocking and cuddling the little waif, continued :

“ ‘ Dearest, sleep! It were better that thou shouldst embrace

The dreams that are calling to thee ;
 Though e'er in thy wakefulness, methinks I trace
 God's guiding hand beckoning me.

“ ‘ For the world fain would lure me to pleasures that
 wait,
 But to feel in mine arms thou dost live —

And to gaze in thine eyes with their heaven-lit smile
Is a sacred joy worlds cannot give.

“ ‘ So we’re here on the borders of Rock-a-by Lake,
Dolly, and baby, and I ;
And we rock in the starlight of loving content,
We will float into dreams by and by.’ ”

Kate’s eyes were shut tight when Aunt Nabby finished, though she was winking hard with the closed lids, trying to make believe she was sound asleep. “Dolly, an’ baby, an’ I,” she repeated. “Joe says that, an’ it makes Kate sleepy,” and she cuddled down as if the poetry had a soothing effect upon her ; but when her eyes had closed once more, and their blinking had almost ceased, a scream from the farther end of the room opened them wide again, and made Aunt Nabby spring from her chair and hold the child closer in her arms. “Lor’ a massy, Elizabeth, what ails you ?”

Beth was turned with a scared white face toward the front window, and being too frightened to speak, she could only point her finger, where, following its direction, Aunt Nabby saw the small pale face of a boy, looking in with hungry eyes at Kate, who, having seen him

already, had slipped from Aunt Nabby's arms and was running as fast as her little legs could carry her, out into the night to meet him.

It was Joe, who had found the poor-farm all too lonely without the darling of his heart, and who had come over narrow bridges, and gruesome places, and braved the terrors of the darkness, to see his little sister before he slept, and to kiss her good night.

After her first delighted greetings were over, Kate pounced upon Joe and dragged him into the house. He looked a little shamefaced when he met Elizabeth's great questioning eyes, but he only pulled off his old hat awkwardly, and said: "Yer know she's all I've got, and the farm seemed kind er dark without her, an' my room wus too lonesome to sleep," and he shivered and drew near the fire. Aunt Nabby looked at him searchingly for a moment, and then she pulled the old hair-cloth sofa close beside the fireplace, and brought out a warm bright quilt and spread it open before the fire. "Yer can sleep here ter-night, Joe; the' hain't no use in your goin' back ter the farm, it's too dark."

Joe seemed slow to comprehend what she meant, but at last his great brown eyes, so ex-

actly like his sister's, opened wide and filled with tears.

“Thank yer,” he said, simply, and threw himself upon the lounge and stretched his arms wide open. In an instant Kate flew to fill them, and the children lay side by side looking into the fire. The only word either spoke in their happiness came from Kate, who glanced over Joe's shoulder reprovingly at Beth as she spoke: “She says I'm her sister, Joe, but I ain't, I'm only yours.” And then both children fell fast asleep with a smile of love lighting their orphan faces.



“BOTH CHILDREN FELL FAST ASLEEP.”

CHAPTER III.

WHEN Aunt Nabby entered the kitchen the next morning, it seemed very much as if she had taken in three homeless waifs instead of one; for the white kitten had perched herself on the back of the old sofa, where she looked roguishly down at the children, and extended her paw every now and then, to cuff Kate's tangled ringlets into a greater confusion, which the owner seemed to enjoy, for she screamed with delight, and snatching the kitten from off the sofa hugged and kissed it; then turning to Joe, repeated her caresses with such tenderness that she brought the tears to Aunt Nabby's eyes. "Bless the child, p'r'aps she don't need the yaller dock ter-day, I'll jest wait an' see 'fore I give it to her."

Joe remained all that day with the children, and Beth, who during her life had enjoyed only the ducks and the old "Creamer" hen for play-mates, was now supremely happy. She called

the favourite speckled hen, and, perching her on her shoulder, whispered to her while she stroked her soft gray wings :

“ Yer musn't be jealous now, Bidly Creamer, cause these is the first children Beth has ever had to play with, and she's wanted some more'n you can ever know, Bidly ! ” Miss Bidly tipped her head on one side, and looked knowingly at Beth, as if she sympathised with her fully, and then she hopped down and proceeded to make friends with the white kitten that reached out her paw and touched playfully the bright red comb, which was the pride of Miss Bidly's heart. Then Beth took Joe and Kate to the barn-yard to introduce them to the pompous old drake and duck, that came out to meet her with welcoming squawks. “ These is my friends, ” she said, solemnly, “ and we play together all day long ; but I'll play with you children to-day, ” and she cast a glance toward her old friends as if in apology.

Down from the hill in Aunt Nabby's field, a little brook babbled on to the mill stream, and here on its banks the children wandered and found shelter from the sun in a thick clump of willow bushes. Under their feet new shoots

from the willow had grown so thickly that Joe was obliged to bring his jack-knife into service, and cut clear a path for the girls to enter. Here in the heart of the bushes a small mound, marked by a rough wooden slab, told the spot where Aunt Nabby's yellow dog lay buried. "It was more than a year ago," she said to the children, "when that precious little critter came a-hobblin' home on three legs, 'cause that miserable old spider of a Square Sslib had put a bullet through his leg. I did all I could ter save him. I did my best, but 'twa'n't no use. I give him sassyfras, ter kill the pizen, an' I poured a half a bottle er Perry Davis's Pain Killer down his blessed little throat, an' I put burdock draughts on all four of his feet, cause I see he wus in a high fever. But it didn't do no good, an' then I jest give him a dose er poppy tea that put him ter sleep fer good an' all! an' now he's a-restin' down there in them willer bushes, an' the little brook sings ter him all day long."

Aunt Nabby's story made a great impression on Joe, and to him this spot was hallowed ground. "Let us build a playhouse here," he whispered to Beth, "and keep Fido company

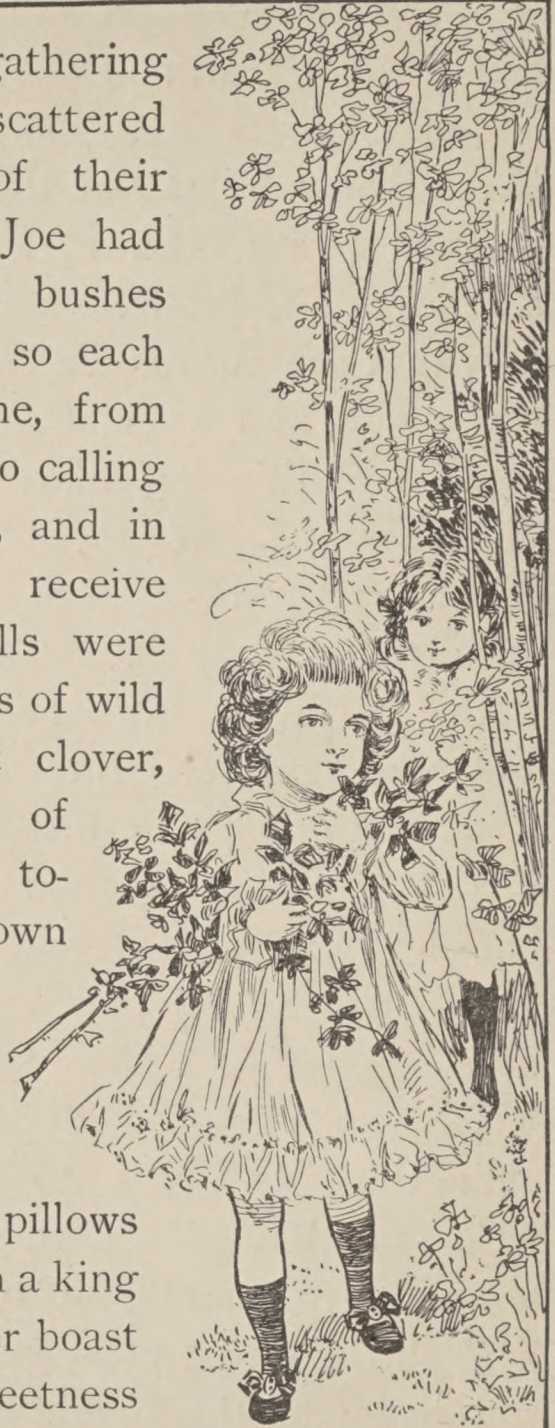
all day." Joe loved the singing of the brook, and he loved, too, the sound of Aunt Nabby's low sweet voice, for there seemed to be something missing from his life; perhaps it was the link that bound him to his past, for he was conscious of a great yearning to remember, which sweet and musical sounds helped to soothe. What was it? No one could tell. He was very small, not larger than a boy of twelve, and it would be hard to guess his age. His face was pale and delicate, almost like a girl's, and the same great red-brown eyes that twinkled in Kate's face, lighted his with a hungry, sad expression, that went straight to Aunt Nabby's heart. In some things Joe's mind was that of a child, but in others he was a man. There seemed to be a strange understanding existing between him and the birds, the cattle, and, in fact, all the inhabitants of the woods, fields, and pastures, through which he roamed. They had told Aunt Nabby at the farm, that sometimes he wandered off for days, and lived with the animals which came at his call; for so exactly could he mimic them that they took him to be one of their kind, nor did they run away when they saw it was but a boy. Birds hopped over

his hands, and rabbits nibbled the grass at his feet without fear, and Joe loved them and was one of them.

And now he sat in the willow bushes, and listened with a far away look on his face to the singing of the brook. How happy he was, and how that song of nature entered into his heart, and made him a child no longer, but a man capable of thinking like other men, and kept him there, he thought, to guard and take care of those two little girls. There was a firm friendship already established between him and Beth, and Kate saw and understood, as over and over again she threw her arms around his neck, and cried, "Beth is not Joe's sister, only Kate is;" and she pouted at Beth, and scolded her all the day, till Beth quite forgot her usual sweet nature, and pulled Kate's curls till she cried.

Joe awoke from his dream then, and tried to make the girls forget they had ever quarrelled. "Come with me," he said, "and you shall gather ferns to carpet our little playhouse, so we may live here all the day, and keep poor Fido company, and listen to the brook, and then we will be happy and good." And all that day the children

worked joyfully, gathering ferns which they scattered over the floors of their apartments, that Joe had cut out from the bushes into little rooms; so each had her own home, from which she could go calling on her neighbour, and in which she could receive callers. The walls were hung with garlands of wild daisies and sweet clover, and little chains of lilac leaves, pinned together with their own stems, were draped in festoons over their heads. There were pillows of ferns to rest upon, pillows more fragrant than a king or queen could ever boast of, and their sweetness





“THE THREE CHILDREN HASTENED HAND IN HAND.”

entered into the children's lives, and stayed with them always, and made them happier for it, just as the song of the brook purified Joe and made him a better boy.

A salt box turned upside down served as a tea-table for them, and their food was the box-berry "pip," and raspberry pies, made of berries laid temptingly between the tender raspberry leaves.

What a pleasant day it had been to Beth and Joe! But the sun was already sinking low over the old mountain road, and hark! yes, there was Aunt Nabby's supper-bell ringing in the distance, and the three children hastened hand in hand back up the hill, to eat the tempting food Aunt Nabby had so lovingly prepared for them. Her face fairly shone with happiness as the children gathered about her table, and only Kate looked a little grieved. "She sha'n't take hold er your hand ag'in, Joe," she said, as he arose to bid them good-bye, and she scowled at Beth, who was almost ready to cry.

It was late when Joe left the house for the poor-farm, and twice Aunt Nabby caught her breath as if she would speak, and ran to the window to look out after him, and twice she sat

down again without a word. All that evening she rocked before the fire without her knitting-work, and gazed into the embers as if some great question were perplexing her, and three times she said aloud: "A boy's a handy thing ter have about the place, it's no use talkin'." The last time she spoke, she was conscious, just as she finished, of a little hand resting confidently on hers, and when she looked down Beth was standing by her side, her eyes raised to Aunt Nabby's face with a mysterious expression shining in them. She placed her finger to her lips warningly, and glanced toward the door of Kate's room. "Hush, Aunt Nabby," she whispered, "don't you make a noise to wake her up, 'cause I've got something I want to tell you.

"Kate's been a naughty girl to me all day, Aunt Nabby, and she made me cry, because I love her, and I want to be her real little sister. I thought and thought about it, and I decided I would write a letter to God, and tell Him all about it. I have put it out my bedroom window, and please won't you let me sleep in the spare bed, 'cause I'm so afraid I'll hear His angel when he reaches down after it, if I sleep in my



own room. Do you suppose He will send for it? Oh, Aunt Nabby, if it is gone in the morning, I shall know there is really and truly a God!"

Beth's cheeks were flushed and her eyes sparkled with an unusual excitement, but when Aunt Nabby tucked her safely in the spare bed and patted her soothingly, it was not long before she had found the road to dreamland, over which she travelled with a bright smile dimpling her rosy cheeks as she slept. It was then that Aunt Nabby tiptoed softly to the open window in Kate's room, and reaching out, drew in the tear-stained letter, and this is what she read :

“MY DEAR GOD: — I want to tell you how much I thank you for takin’ care of me. I wit you would bess Katie and make her a good girl, and make me good too. From

“BETH.”

Tears filled Aunt Nabby’s eyes as she replaced the letter in the envelope and laid it carefully outside the window again :

“The child shall have her test,” she said ; “I’ll leave it with God ter take it er not, jest as He’s a mind ter.”

The next morning the dawn was just waking the robins in the old elm over the house, when a little white-robed figure crept softly across the room and peered, half-frightened, through the window at the spot where the letter had been placed. It was gone !

Beth drew a quivering sigh of relief that told how keenly she had feared the letter would not be taken. She folded her little hands and glanced up to heaven with a quiet awe overspreading her face.

Had God then reached down and taken it away, or had He sent His angel after it, — or had the swallow in her morning flight taken it up to heaven ? All these questions filled Beth’s

heart with wonder, but where could she find an answer? And then she crept quietly into Aunt Nabby's bed, and folding her hands upon her breast, fell asleep with a happy smile on her face.

It was late when she awoke to find Kate standing by the bed, neatly dressed in one of her own little white aprons of long ago. Kate's curls were untangled, and had been brushed into little corkscrews that resembled Aunt Nabby's, and her face shone with the happiness of a good and wholesome breakfast. Aunt Nabby had been trying to make her understand how sad she had made Beth feel, by being cross to her, and then she told her of the letter, which had been taken away.

"Well, if God really took the letter," she replied, "then Kate *must* be a good girl, and never be naughty to Beth no more," and Beth's arms stole lovingly about her neck, and their troubles were at an end. But where the letter went remained a mystery they could neither solve nor forget.

CHAPTER IV.

AFTER Kate and Beth had forgotten their quarrels and become reconciled to each other, all the earth seemed glad, as they hop-skipped hold of hands, down to the playhouse in the willow bushes. The tall tasselled corn murmured in the morning breeze, like the sound of distant voices, and the field daisies turned their bright faces as if to say good morning, as the children passed. An oriole, flashing his golden wings over their heads, sent forth such a lay of song, that Kate paused to admire him, and then she said, wistfully, "I wish Joe was here, Beth, he does love the song of the lark so!" Swallows dipped and skimmed through the clear skies and then steered their black heads straight toward the wide open door of Aunt Nabby's barn. Beth's face was radiantly happy as she watched them, for she felt at peace with all the world, and something of her happiness entered

into Kate's heart, for she paused again presently, and pulling Beth down to her, wound her arms affectionately around her neck and whispered in her ear, "Kate is glad to be here — only she wants Joe."

As the children entered the bushes a soft satisfied "ca-ca-ca-ca-ca" greeted their ears, as though the "Creamer hen" were saying, "Good morning, girls, I got here first!" for there she sat with her little round eyes looking contentedly up at them, from the depths of Beth's fern-carpeted room. She pecked lazily at the raspberries which the children held out to her, and then resumed her winking and blinking as if half asleep. Beth stood happily breathing in the sweet odour of the dried ferns, when a little "mew, mew," from behind, told the girls that Kate's white kitten had also found her way to the playhouse, quite as soon as they. Both children burst into laughter, but that animated little mouse-trap, kitty, now known as "Trap," whisked away in search of a faint "cheep" which her small ears had detected somewhere about the bushes.

"It's a baby squirrel, Trap, you naughty cat, and don't you dare to touch her," Beth called

out, and Trap cuddled away in Kate's neck, where she held her fast.

“Let's get out the table, Beth, and all the dishes, and make some pies and have dinner all ready 'fore Joe gits here.” Joe had not told her he would come to-day, but her own heart said so, and faithful little housewife that she was, she must have his dinner ready and waiting. She brought out some bits of broken china from a shelf nailed into the box that had been converted into a closet, and dusting them carefully, proceeded to set the table.

“Biddy Creamer, you can't have these berries, 'cause they're for pies for Joe;” and she spread a delicate leaf with the juicy berries, and held it out to Beth. “Ain't these berries pretty, Beth?” she said, joyously. “Who made them grow, do you know?”

“God made them grow, all for you and me.”

“No, no, Beth, how could He push them up out of the ground, when He's up over our heads?”

“He's everywhere, Kate; up over our heads, in the ground, and perhaps he's right here in our playhouse, mebby right up on top of yer cupboard over there, cause He's into every-

thing." Kate's eyes opened wide at the unexpected explanation, and then she said, roguishly :

"Oh, Beth! Is God into everything? Well, then, he must be a terror!"

"You mustn't say that, Kate," a voice answered from behind the girls, and the bushes parted to let Joe through with rapid strides, to meet his little sister's outstretched arms. There was again a faint "cheep" from overhead, and Trap flew past her mistress, bent on a hunting expedition. Joe smiled and looked wise. "Let her go, Kate; it is a baby squirrel, but Trap is too small to catch him," and then the children sat down to their play dinner.

How fast the happy morning passed, just as, in days and years to come, the hours had a way of flying, when spent in that retreat by the river side. How many castles were built here, how many confidences exchanged, only those three children know, whose lives were blessed by Aunt Nabby's generous love.

Joe had never been like other boys since he came to Putnam Mills, and it was probable that just before that time some serious illness had deprived him of all memory concerning the past. There were many hours spent in the willow

playhouse trying to recall something of his former life, but all in vain ; everything was vague, so vague that the only real impression left him was that of somewhere, at some time, having heard strains of beautiful music, played by one whom he loved. It was probably for this reason that his mind became active, and seemed almost to reach out and grasp the past when he listened to musical sounds now. Often he would draw Beth close beside him, and, taking Kate upon his knee, would pour into their eager ears all the strange thoughts and hopes of his life. He was so simple and childlike, and yet so manly, it was little wonder that the children frolicked with him and trusted him, while they looked up to him as their natural protector and comrade. Joe was a superior scholar in the day-school, yet so simple-minded was he, that a child many years younger could deceive him and lead him away by the most impossible story.

He sat a long time silent this morning, listening to the song of the birds, and the brook, which seemed to hold such strange power over him, and then calling the children to him, he poured out his heart in the usual strain :

“When I am a man, Kate, and have found our other home, and you are grown large and grand looking, like Aunt Nabby, only younger you know, with all the roses in your cheeks, we will go to school away from here, to college, perhaps; and mebbby I’ll have money to take Beth with us, who knows, if I find our other home? I shall know it by the sound, Kate, know it by the soft, sweet voices I used to hear, like those of some instruments, such as we never have here. Sometimes I feel as though if I had the schoolmaster’s fiddle, I could make a sound just like it. When I get big, and have money, I shall have a fiddle, see if I don’t,” and then he fell to watching the brook, and devouring its song with hungry ears; and the desires of his heart — to find his home, to go to school, and to play the violin — were lost in the delight of the hour.

Kate and Beth watched him quietly at first, because they loved and respected his moods, but they watched him breathlessly in a few moments, because a tame and beautiful gray squirrel, which seemed to have come in answer to his soft, unconscious whistle, was standing on her hind legs close beside him, and peering

up into his face. Beth made frantic motions to attract his attention, which finally succeeded, and Joe reached out his hand, and lifting the squirrel gently, buttoned her inside his coat, leaving out only her gray bushy tail, that trailed down over him, to tell of her presence. The children laughed and clapped their hands for joy, but Joe was still looking about him, in the trees over his head, and under the stone wall. "It was not this one that cheeped when I first came in," he said. "She must have a baby somewhere," and it was not long before he found two baby squirrels snugly hidden away under the stump of an old beech-tree.

While the children were so happy in their willow house, Aunt Nabby was having some stirring experiences in her shady little garden at home. She watched Kate and Beth dance across the field, with a happy smile on her face, and then she gave way to a train of thoughts which the sight of them had called up.

"That letter to God was a very good thing fer Beth ter do," she said, aloud. "'Twould have be'n hard ter manage the girls if they had kep' on a-quarrelin', an' I never'd 'a' sent her back ter the farm, never in the world, fer that

old spider ter git holt of! I don't wonder he wants her, she's ser pretty; he was always passin' fond of a pretty face," and she tossed her curls defiantly over her shoulder.

It could not be denied that Aunt Nabby was a little harsh with the Squire, for others in the village had not found him lacking a heart altogether, and many a sunny childish head laid on his shoulder with perfect confidence. True it was he was shrewd in trade, and that he owned half the town, and kept no help for the spinster sister who presided over his house for him. But there was some mystery connected with Aunt Nabby's strong hatred of him, something that even the neighbours could not understand. There was a rumour, and rumours are often true, that in Aunt Nabby's palmy days, when the Squire came wooing on the hill, a misunderstanding had arisen between them, on account of a younger brother of his, who was well known as the "musical scapegoat" of the town. Whatever the wrong deed had been, it resulted in the young Squire having made his last exit from the Quest house, just ahead of the toe of old Squire Quest's cowhide boot. The gossips of the village extended their sympathy to Squire

Sslib, and assured each other, in tragic whispers, that he never returned to make any explanation to Nabby, because he would have been obliged to confess his brother in the wrong. However this may have been, Aunt Nabby had since persisted in turning a stubborn broad back toward him whenever she had seen him approaching. In her opinion he had ignored her, and he should see that she could return the same indifference to him. There were times when her face softened as she watched his gig retreating down the hill. She realised that the Squire was growing old alone, and she pitied him because his wild young brother whom he loved had left his home years ago, and gone out into the world no one knew where; but she did not indulge this mood for long, and the old defiant look, so unlike her usual sweet self, would creep back into her face, till it gradually melted into her own bright sunny smile.

She was working among her tiger-lilies this morning in a happy frame of mind, when Joe ran up the hill and inquired breathlessly for Kate. He only paused to say "Good morning," and then ran off again in search of the children.

“Bless his little heart, how happy he looks after sleepin’ in that wretched old poorhouse all night. Beats all how folks can be happy anywheres if they only think so! A boy’s a good thing ter have round the house,” and she brushed a smouch of brown pollen from her nose. “These lilies is dirty things ter work amongst. I’ll take the hollyhocks next,” and she turned to a long row of those brilliant flowers which extended the whole length of her garden. Aunt Nabby’s house and garden were a veritable bower of bloom from early spring till the late fall. Here grew the soft cream-white honeysuckle, intertwined with the glowing trumpet-vine, both of which seemed to run riot over the little house, from the low stone underpinning to the ridge-pole on its roof. The path leading from her door was so nearly obscure with flowers, that it was but a continuation of the blossoms of larkspur, yellow marigold, phlox of all colours, petunia, portulaca and lobelia, till they reached the old garden where they spread themselves out in a bewildering confusion of glory, that covered every nook and corner of the shady retreat, even taking possession here of the sandy little paths, and allowing Aunt

Nabby scarcely room enough to wander between the tangled beds.

Near that corner of the garden next the road, two stately locust-trees stood sentinel over a small and delicate lilac hedge, but newly planted, which Aunt Nabby hoped would some day screen her whole garden from the road. Between the garden and front yard a lattice had been built, and over this, hiding Aunt Nabby entirely from the walk leading up to her door, a luxuriant hop vine climbed and revelled in the morning sun. This vine was the delight of Aunt Nabby's heart, as was also the little patch of herbs growing under its shade all along the ground. She was just admiring their thrift, when she heard a step upon the gravel walk, and peered through the hops to see who was coming. Her apron, which she held full of withered buds and dried leaves, fell down, letting its contents all out at her feet. She pulled with a quick gesture a curl over her forehead, then brushed it back again as if in anger. Squire Sslib was approaching her door with a folded sheet of paper in his hand. He paused just inside the gate, and opened the sheet, allowing his eye to rest with a keen interest upon

it, and then folding it again, advanced and rapped lightly on the kitchen door.

Aunt Nabby pulled her sunbonnet over her face and fell to picking hops with trembling haste.

“What on earth does he want now, I'd like ter know; nothin', of course, but that precious child! Yer'd better keep away, yer old spider, fer yer too late; the town's give me a fust lien on her. Rap away, mister, no wonder yer look solemn-choly, and kind er mournful like, round the mouth, 'cause the's nobody ter play in your yard, an' no-



budy ter set around your table. Well, yer may look mournful, but yer can't have her! The waves er Zion mourns, and few comes ter their solemn feast, and the'll be fewer ter come ter your feast, Square, an' nobody ter blame but yourself." She continued to fill her apron with the hops, pausing between times to glance curiously at the Squire, resuming her speech with the picking.

"It'll take somethin' more'n Pendleton's Panacea ter heal up all the sorrers yer'll feel some day — mebby yer'll need some of these hops ter quiet yer down fore yer die, an' mebby a hop piller ter lay yer head on, ter put yer ter sleep."

She looked a little softened now toward the Squire, and took a step forward — faltered, and stopped short, for he was making his way back to the gate, reading once again the open page which he held in his hand. He stepped slowly, glanced around the yard thoughtfully, and then passed out the gate and down the hill, with the sheet of white paper still gleaming back at Aunt Nabby from his hand, holding her spell-bound, and holding, too, the fate of several human lives in its mysterious folds.

Aunt Nabby dropped on to the settee, and sat there some time quite as limp and wilted as the dying hops scattered at her feet. It was an hour before she even spoke, and then she heard the children's feet on the walk, coming for the dinner that remained uncooked in the pantry.

"What upon earth could he have wanted?" she said, and then she went into the house and prepared the dinner, with her face as calm as if nothing had happened.

Beth was running ahead of the others and was half-way up the walk when she called: "Come here quick, Aunt Nabby, and see what Joe's got," and then all three burst in upon the quiet of the little house, making Aunt Nabby forget everything but them.

Joe still carried the mother squirrel in his blouse, but her two babies had been captured also, and he held them in close confinement beside her.

"Please, Aunt Nabby, may I keep them here? They will kill them at the farm," and Joe's dark eyes pleaded more eagerly than his words. He proceeded to shut the kitchen doors, and all the windows, and then he placed the mother and her two babies upon the floor.

Aunt Nabby had always been passionately fond of animals, and she looked with delight upon these beautiful creatures. They were so tame that they perched with perfect faith on Joe's shoulder, and hardly seemed to be afraid of Aunt Nabby. She did not realise then, that all animals had faith in Joe, and she gave her consent after a few minutes for him to keep them in the shed, if he would take care of them himself. And so a soft bed was made for the babies, which Joe named Dick and Moses, and the three squirrels were quite at home with Trap, the Creamer hen, and the old duck and drake that had long since claimed the shed for their trysting-place, and where they all met and talked on an equality.

To say that Joe was delighted with this small menagerie, would but mildly express his feelings, and he spent so many hours among his favourites that they seemed a part of himself, and surely were a large part of his life.

It was often quite dark when Joe left the house for the farm at night, and Aunt Nabby would watch him out of sight through the window, making little blinders of her hands against the glass. On one particular evening, when she

could no longer see him, she sat down by the fire again, and looked into it without her knitting-work, till late at night. She was surely considering some great question, and when she covered the fire and went to bed she looked as if the matter were well settled in her mind.

It was just sunrise the next morning, when she closed the front door softly and hurried down the hill and on through the Mills with rapid steps, straight to the poor-farm.

When she returned, Joe was with her, and each of them carried a newspaper bundle, and Joe hugged close a small, strange-looking box under his left arm. Aunt Nabby looked questioningly at it several times on the way home, but she closed her mouth whenever she began to speak, as if she realised it was nothing to her what he carried in that dark, richly carved box, and he should keep his secret, if he chose to. When they reached the house, however, Joe held out the box to Aunt Nabby with a trembling hand, saying as he did so: "Will you please take this and take care of it. It was given to me by Kate's nurse, the day she went away, and all I can remember is that I promised her I would never open it till I was fifteen

years old. I don't know just how old I am, Aunt Nabby, but I've been thinking I shall be able to open it in a few years now. She said I must never let anybody see it, and I would be sorry if I did not keep my promise to her, so I have done just as she told me to, and have kept it hidden ever since I lived at the farm. I shall feel safe about it now, here with you," and he laid his head on the table and brushed away a tear.

"You are so kind," he continued, "so kind to Kate — and to me — now that I am to live with you. I shall grow up a strong man, and take care of you when you are old."

CHAPTER V.

THAT night, after the little house was quiet, Aunt Nabby sat thinking longer than she had ever before been known to do. She must have had her very best thinking-cap on, for the matter seemed a serious one with which she had to contend, yet she had never been so long in all her life in trying to decide right from wrong. The little Dutch clock hanging over the kitchen shelf struck eleven, and she looked up quite startled and just as much puzzled as she had done all the evening. At length she arose and walked to the window, saying as she went, "It's dreatful hard tryin' ter decide things alone, without never havin' nobody ter help yer." She leaned forward to look out the kitchen window toward the Mills, but she paused as if a new thought had suddenly come to her. "I'll tell yer what I'll do!" she whispered, "I'll jest look out that winder, and if I see a single light a-shinin' in the village I'll open that box

an' see what's in it. If the' hain't no light I won't open it! The nurse said Joe mustn't open it, but she couldn't judge what was right fer everybody else." She made the usual little blinders with her hands against the pane, and gazed some time steadily, before her eyes could penetrate the darkness, and then she gave a start and fell backwards into a chair. Away across the fields, straight over the mill-pond, on the high hill opposite, a bright light was shining, and reflecting its rays in the water flowing smooth and dark above the dam. The light was in Squire Sslib's house!

"Seems ter me," she muttered, "the's some providence in that; strange, his should 'a' been the only light shinin' in the town exceptin' mine!" She stole quietly across the room and peered into both the bedrooms. The children were all fast asleep. Then she tiptoed back again, and opening the secretary door, she cautiously brought out the dark little box which Joe had given into her keeping only that morning. It had a strong looking lock, and there was no key accompanying it; how should she ever open it. She examined the keyhole carefully, and then turning to the old secretary

door, removed the key from that, and placing it in the lock of the box, turned it once without difficulty, but the cover still refused to open.

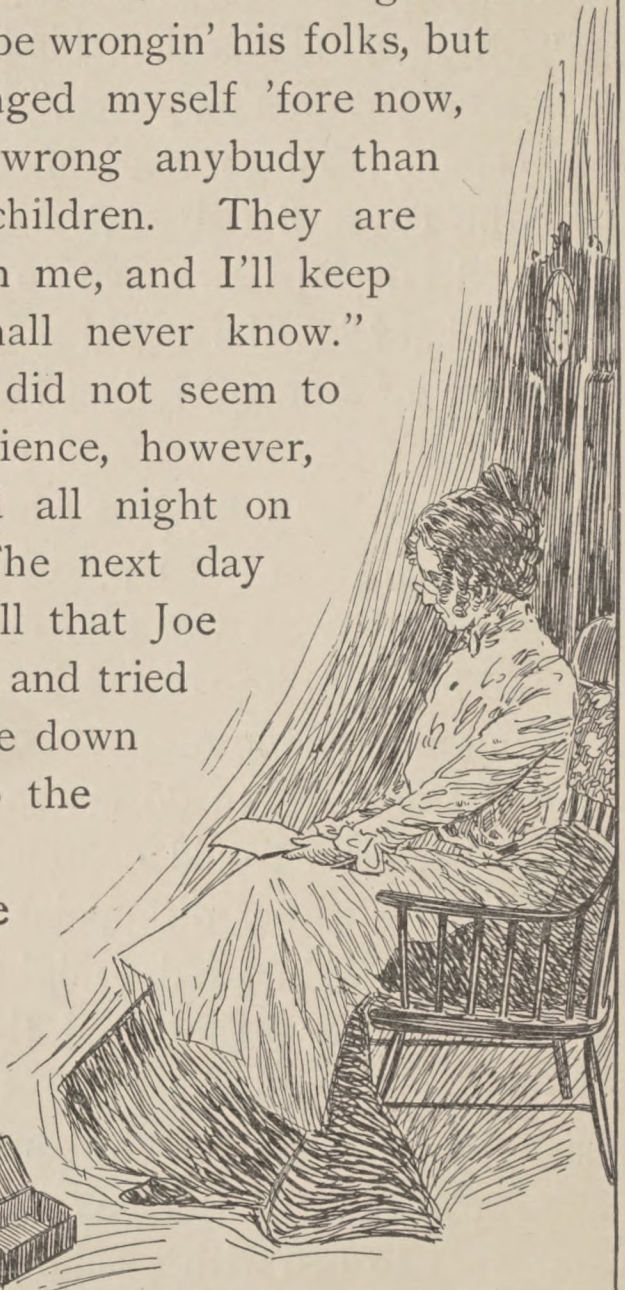
“Strange,” she said, “this key should fit that lock, and yet won’t open it,” and she turned it once again. To her amazement the lock sprung and the cover flew back, revealing nothing but a sealed envelope directed to “Master Joe” — “Joe what?” She could scarcely believe the evidence of her own eyes! Yes, Joe’s name was written out in full, and when Aunt Nabby began to realise fully just what that name was, the box fell from her lap with a clatter, and the envelope lay with the seal unbroken, beside it on the floor. She rocked herself wildly to and fro, but she made no effort to pick up the box. She had no need to do so, for already she felt what the letter would contain, and the news it would bring to her disappointed heart.

“I might ’a’ knowed, I might ’a’ knowed!” she whispered after a time, and then she tore open the seal and read the letter through without a change of expression. When she had finished, she replaced it in the box upon the high shelf, and went to bed with a calm decision written on her face. “Bless that boy,” she whispered to

herself again, "I know now who he is, but nobody else shall know till the right time comes. I may be wrongin' his folks, but I've been wronged myself 'fore now, an' I'd rather wrong anybody than them blessed children. They are happy here with me, and I'll keep 'em, an' *he* shall never know."

These remarks did not seem to ease her conscience, however, and she tossed all night on her pillow. The next day she looked so ill that Joe became worried, and tried to make her lie down and let him do the housework.

After this she made a desperate effort to appear well, and tripped about till the work



was done, then she threw herself once more on the settee in the old garden, and meditated, looking into distance. It was the first time in all her life that her conscience had been burdened with anything akin to deceit, and it was proving too much for her. Fortunately, the children did not leave her long alone, for Joe dragged her off to the wood-shed to watch with him the Creamer hen and the white kitten, lying side by side in a barrel of oats. Here for many weeks Miss Biddy had stolen her nest away, and after carefully burying each egg deep in the oats, she had walked off "with cackle enough for two eggs," Beth said. Trap had grown into a staid, motherly-looking pussy, and the friendship between her and the hen was a source of great delight to the children. Beth was especially fond of the speckled hen, for as long ago as she could remember, Aunt Nabby had bought her of a Mr. Creamer; and when he took the hen from the bag, and she flew about the yard clucking, and tearing with her beak at the hideous red flannel tied to her leg, Beth had befriended her, and removed the string for which Miss Biddy seemed to return the deepest gratitude by showing a great fondness for her deliverer.

“Yer may have her, an’ welcome,” the man had said; “she’s bound ter set, and I don’t want her to! If yer lookin’ fer a settin’ hen, she’s all right.” And true to his promise, she stole her nest away each season, and surprised her mistress by coming out with a brood of fluffy yellow chickens that always looked exactly to Beth like so many little downy canaries. And now it was quite plain to the children that she was striving to gather a nest of eggs to sit upon in the oat-barrel. This was Trap’s favourite napping-place too, and Biddy each day, nothing daunted, laid her snowy egg with Trap purring close beside her in the barrel. It seemed as if there was a mutual understanding between them, for Trap was always just a little ahead of the hen, in snuggling down among the oats, and never left till Biddy began to cackle, when she would jump out and run away as if she hardly liked quite so much ado over such a little thing as an egg.

“We will leave the eggs there,” Aunt Nabby had said, “and then we will have some chickens when the time comes right.”

One morning, not many weeks after this,

there were unusual sounds issuing from the wood-shed, and when the children, standing on their tip-toes, peered into the oat-barrel, they saw a sight more strange than the sounds which had aroused their curiosity, — a sight so strange indeed that you will scarcely believe what I am going to tell you! Miss Biddy was fluttering about, clucking with ruffled feathers, now standing on the edge of the barrel top, now flying off to the floor, but always calling her ten tiny chicks, that were struggling in vain to obey her calls, for the high sides of the barrel and their unfledged wings held them prisoners. “We must turn the barrel down and let them run out on to the floor,” Joe said ; but Beth was ahead of him, for she claimed the chickens. “Let me do it,” she urged, and then — she looked into the barrel! There, scrambling among the oats, were Biddy’s tiny, fluffy babies, and close beside them, watching with deep interest and concern, was Trap, cuddling up and purring to three little white kittens, so exactly like herself that it was quite laughable. Beth’s scream soon brought Kate to where she stood, and looking with wide-opened eyes of delight, she claimed the kitties for her very own.

“How, funny, Beth!” she said. “How funny that you an’ me should bof have babies in the same mornin’! Now everybody’s got babies of their own; we belongs to Aunt Nabby, and the cat and kitties ter me, and Joe’s got his squirrels, an’, Beth, you’s got the chickens. I guess the ducks is Joe’s, too, ’cause they seem ter mind him better’n anybody.”

Kate was growing very old now in appearance, and her quaint little sayings seemed far beyond her years. Every day she grew more beautiful, too, as she realised perfect health and happiness, and she had an unusual habit of coining words that quite took Aunt Nabby’s breath away. Some of these words were extremely expressive, and particularly so, as you shall see, were her two favourites, “tomtactum” and “falubritic.” To-day, Joe had gone in search of the mother-duck, who had stolen her nest away, and he was hoping to find some ducklings to cheer the heart of the sad old drake, that had moped and had the blues ever since his mate disappeared.

Kate was in the garden with the doll and doll carriage, given her by the Squire on the previous Christmas day, and dolly, who was “quite



“‘NOW EVERYBODY’S GOT BABIES OF THEIR OWN.’”

worn out wif sittin' in the sun so long," was cuddled in her little mother's arms.

"Yer must keep still and rest now, Dolly, 'cause by an' by, mamma's goin' to teach you to talk. Joe, he's gone after that naughty duck, 'cause she's runned off and left her papa, who loves her jest awful, and cries about her all day; sometimes I seen big tears, Dolly, a-runnin' down his — his — he ain't got no cheeks, what shall I say, Dolly? I guess its the nose I mean!

"Now, Miss Dolly, you must sit up, an' be a tomtactum maiden, for I want you to talk. The morning is very falubritic, and you shouldn't ought ter waste it. I shall tell you some rules that you must use when you get older; now say them after me:

"First, when somebody knocks at the front door, don't never run and peek to see who's there.

"When company comes, don't go in unless Aunt Nabby calls you, and then be very tomtactum, and don't speak less you're spoken to.

"Don't leave your napkin unfolded.

"Never call the Squire nor the minister by their first names.

“Never say sarcy fings ter old folks.

“Git your lessons, and don't cheat. And always say, ‘yes, sir,’ an’ ‘no, sir,’ to the minister and the schoolmarm.

“You're a bad girl, Dolly Quest, yer ain't said one single word since I commenced. Mebby you're sick, but yer can't die, Dolly, 'cause you've never learned ter talk, and yer couldn't tell Peter yer name, and I'm sure, Dolly, they never'd learn you ter talk up in heaven.”

And so she jabbered on, always petting and caressing the doll, till Joe broke in upon her with a delighted face.

His head was bare, and his big palm-leaf hat, with the brims held close together, enclosed eight soft little white ducklings, and the mother duck, strutting with pride for her babies, and with perfect confidence in Joe, followed close at his heels. They had hardly arrived in the garden, when Mister Drake, hearing the calls of his wife, came rushing out to meet her with a welcoming “quack,” and a real expression of gladness shining in his eyes, and depicted by every movement. It was then that Joe placed his hat upon the ground and allowed the scrambling

brood to tumble over its rim and join their parents. And now a strange thing took place, for the unnatural father of these snowy little birds, instead of being very proud of his offspring, looked at them with his wicked head perched on one side, and then made a dive with his beak for the nearest baby. Of course the mother defended her child, and a quarrel arose in the duck family which so wounded the father that he was loth to forget it, or to take his little ones into his confidence and affection.

Joe had hoped that this state of things would cease, and that the stern father drake would learn to love his little ones, as all good parents should do, but instead, each day that passed seemed only to make the breach between them wider. Often the faithful duck would approach her mate with soft and gentle quacks of love, but his only reply was a ferocious peck that sent her away with loud and angry cries. At length, when her babies were four weeks old, and beginning to look like very respectable ducklings, with tail feathers started that filled their mother's heart with pride, she made one last venture to win for them their father's love, by leading them bravely out to where he was

standing on a log, beside a tub of water containing Aunt Nabby's favourite pond-lilies.

He turned a lordly head from viewing his own reflection in the smooth water of the tub, and took one vicious glance at his family as they approached. "Quack! quack!" said the mother duck, and "quack" said all the little ones, as if they were saying "How do you do," to the old bird; and one brave little fellow, the very flower of the brood, used his tiny wings for the first time, and landed on the log, close beside his father. There was an approving voice from the mother that seemed to say, "Well done, my baby," and at the same time to arouse all the evil in the drake's nature. He turned and looked at her, but he saw only love and pride for her offspring, that drove him mad with jealousy. Had he been a man, and could have spoken, I am sure he would have said, "You false creature, you no longer have any love left for me, but only for these squawking children, and I will teach you who is master here!" and then suiting the action to the word, he snatched the brave little duck beside him in his beak, and pinched his neck till he could not breathe, and dropped him into the tub of water.

The mother squawked and flew about the yard, but all in vain. No one came to the rescue, and the duckling died. After this, she led her brood away with a solemn air, and hid them in the willow bushes. She brought them to the house at each feeding time, but took greatest care to keep them away from their father. Indeed, she did not need to do this, had she but known that he was well out of their reach, for Joe, who had come upon him shortly after the murder of his baby, found him gazing into the tub with a smile, and such an expression of delight on his face, that he surmised his guilt, and gave him the murderer's punishment, — that of solitary confinement. He was shut into a barrel in the barn-chamber.

For more than a week the mother duck scarcely tasted food, and at length, overcome with grief at the desertion of her mate, and the loss of her dearest baby, she quietly went to sleep in the old willow bushes, and lay with the wind in the willows and the song of the brook chanting a dirge to the babies all night long, as they nestled under her cold wings.

Joe found her the next day, and buried her beside Aunt Nabby's dog. All the time he

dug the grave he kept up a low musical whistle, that spoke the anguish of his heart. All animals were dear to him, and especially so were these his pets. He stopped occasionally to play with Moses, the pretty gray squirrel that was standing on his shoulder, and to tell his troubles to him ; and the squirrel, wholly without fear of his little master, looked wise, and listened as if he understood and sympathised.

For several days after the old duck died, the drake, having been relieved from confinement, sought her with a sad and pitiful air. During this time Joe kept the little ones well hidden from their father, fearing he would repeat his cruelty, if allowed to be near them ; but at length, when his sorrow became so evidently sincere, Joe ventured to tell him just what he could do to redeem himself, and then took him under his arm down to the willow bushes, presenting him with due ceremony to the little ones as follows : “ Now, Mr. Drake, here are your motherless babies, and you may see them and be with them, if you will be kind to them, and never again pinch one of their necks. Do you hear ? ” It really seemed as if he did, for no sooner had he jumped down from Joe's arms,

than he began a cheery motherly cluck, that set the little ones running toward him, all in a flutter of delight. There was no evidence of their suspecting him of being any other than the faithful mother that had kept their little bodies from the chill night air, since first they softly peeped outside the shell. Mr. Drake looked about him as if searching for some one, but when he failed to see his mate, a strange thing took place. He continued his clucking till all the ducklings were close beside him, and then down he sat in the warm earth, and stretching out his wings in a tender, gentle way, gathered his dear ones under them and closed his eyes as though at last he had found rest. Nor did this end his loving ministry, for day and night, till his children had grown out of ducklinghood, into wise-looking boy and girl ducks, did he guard and tend them with fondest care, always as gentle as any mother could possibly have lavished upon them. Through all their playful pranks of running away in the rain, or declining to come when he called them, he still bore a patient, happy manner, so different from his former self that Aunt Nabby and Joe were deeply impressed.

“I don’t know,” she said, after watching him give up his breakfast to the little ones; “I don’t know, but he seems ter me exactly like a person that had been very naughty in his younger days, and even though he knew he was a-doin’ wrong, he wouldn’t stop, but jest kep’ a-goin’ till he most got ter the end of his rope, that brought him up ser short and pulled ser tight, he jest had ter stop an’ think. Perhaps in the meantime he buried his mother, or lost his sweetheart, an’ the grief of it brought him ter his senses, and then he saw the’ was still some good left in the world fer him ter do, and he set to, and took care of some motherless little brood.”

She glanced, half frightened at her own reasoning, across the field to the Squire’s house, and then she gathered up her ball of yarn, and pulling a longer thread, fell to knitting and rocking vehemently. “I dunno,” she mumbled, “p’r’aps I be a-wrongin’ him; mebbly if he had a hungry little brood ter work fer, and tend, he’d go ter thinkin’ too, and realise all the wrongs he’s done ter others. But there, it’s past and gone, let it go! I mustn’t let that pennyroyal tea get ter boilin’, it’ll spoil it,” and

she called in her clear, rich voice to Beth: "Push back that dipper of herbs on the stove, and then go into Joe's room and bring out his best blue pants, the's a little place I want ter darn right under the knee."

Beth answered cheerily from the house, but she came running out to Aunt Nabby presently, with a stream of blood trickling down her cheek.

"I tried to take the pants from the closet, Aunt Nabby, and Moses was in his bed on the closet shelf, and he wouldn't let me have them, and just because I tried to get them in spite of him, he jumped right at me and bit me. Do you see? That Moses is getting to love Joe so, he doesn't allow one of us to touch a thing that belongs to him."

Aunt Nabby bathed the wound in cold water, and wetting a piece of brown paper, stuck it over the swollen part and then when she saw that Beth was not badly hurt, she began to laugh in her clear, rippling voice, that soon brought Joe from the barn to see what was the matter. Joe was always happy when Aunt Nabby laughed.

She was quite as fond of Moses as he was, and indeed Moses had become so intelligent

that he seemed to them almost human. Next to Joe he loved Aunt Nabby, and she returned his love warmly, and for hours at a time he sat upon her shoulder, playing with the little curls that persisted in falling over her neck, tossing and biting them much as a playful kitten would. This was always in Joe's absence, for whenever he was present, Moses paid his entire devotion to him. Aunt Nabby was all right in her place, but that was clearly out of Joe's room!

"He's the knowin'est cretur," she often said to callers, "I ever see! Seems as if he knows more'n some people, ernough sight. If I go in ter make Joe's bed, I can do anything I choose ter; I can put on clean sheets, and tidy up, but jest let me touch anything of Joe's, and that squirrel resents it, and jumps right at me. He loves radishes and peanuts, and you jest ought ter see him eat them. Dick is jest a common squirrel, cunnin' ernough, but he can't hold a candle ter Moses." And so she would run on, till Moses became a personality of great importance in the neighbourhood.

After Joe captured the old squirrel and her two babies, the mother remained in confinement till her children were quite grown up; and when

she saw how readily they learned, and took to the ways of the house, it seemed to grieve her greatly, and she drooped and pined, till Joe set her free one bright autumn day, and watched her scamper over the fields to the great oak-tree, where she fell to work with joy, hiding the nuts under ground, and hoarding them in hollow stumps, for the silvery, soft little ones that she hoped would come to share her home another spring. Dick and Moses, who had remained with Joe in perfect content, seemed scarcely to miss their mother, but grew more cunning each day. It was strange that Aunt Nabby, so full of love for her children, could have found room in her heart for a gray squirrel, but there seemed to be no limit to her affections, for they reached out after every object which came in their way. Many were the interesting stories she told the children in Sunday school about Dick and Moses, and many were the jokes she played upon strangers stopping at her door, for she spoke of the squirrels as though they were human beings, calling and introducing them to travellers as such.

Ever since the night Aunt Nabby had opened the box which Joe had given into her keeping,

she had been a changed woman. She looked thinner and taller now than of yore, and she started nervously at every sound. Evidently there was something preying upon her mind.

She was alone this bright June morning, sitting in the dooryard just in front of the lilac hedge that was radiant in its blossoms of lilac and white. Bees droned from cluster to cluster of the fragrant blossoms, and an oriole warbled cheerfully as the sun glinted on his shining wings over her head, while he darted into the nest he was hanging from a limb of the old elm above the footpath leading up to her door. Aunt Nabby seemed to be thinking very deeply this morning, and she jumped when a footfall sounded on the walk. She peered over her glasses, and then got up so quickly that she upset her chair with the knitting-work in it, and left Trap running after the rolling ball of yarn.

A man was coming up the yard with a heavy satchel in his hand, and Aunt Nabby extended her hand somewhat coldly to him.

“Lor sakes, Elder Parsons, it’s you, is it? Why, if I’d a-knowed you was comin’ ter call on me, I’d a-turned my apron clean side out. I’m

afraid it's pretty dirty now. Be you a-travellin', Elder, or what do yer carry in yer bag?"

He moved a little uncomfortably, and replied: "I'm travelling with some essences and perfumes, Miss Quest, trying to raise the mortgage on the church at the head of the pond. You know my expenses are large, too; we have fourteen children, and if you can buy a bottle of me it will help along considerably, and the Lord will bless you." He assumed a fervent tone, and Aunt Nabby tossed her curls skeptically. She had never liked Elder Parsons, but she readily bought a bottle of Florida water, which was her chief delight and her one extravagance.

"The Lord bless you," the Elder groaned. "I thank you, Miss Quest, shall we have prayers before I go?"

A mischievous twinkle came into Aunt Nabby's eyes.

"No, I thank yer, Elder, I don't think I need yer prayers, but mebbey Moses would like ter have yer pray with him, 'cause he hain't been out ter church fer two years."

The Elder looked hopeful, and Aunt Nabby led the way to Joe's room, and opening the door

solemnly, called: "Moses, come here. Elder Parsons wants ter pray with yer."

There was a little rustling noise in the closet, and Moses appeared, and standing on his hind legs, deliberately shelled a peanut and passed it out to the Elder.

"Moses, this is Elder Parsons, and it's time fer yer ter say yer prayer; the Elder needs ter be prayed with," and Moses, as if he really understood Aunt Nabby's words, hung his strange little hands demurely down, and continuing to stand on his hind legs, closed his eyes in a pious manner that sent the Elder out of the house with rapid strides which soon brought him to the road. He did not wish to lose his dignity enough to laugh, and surely Aunt Nabby had entirely forgotten, or else she did not possess any reverence for him, to invite him in to pray with a common gray squirrel! He grew more and more angry with every step down the hill, while Aunt Nabby sat coolly under the tree cuddling Moses in her neck. Joe had long ago taught Moses the trick of standing on his hind legs and closing his eyes, but it was purely accidental that he had done so when Aunt Nabby spoke to him now, though she

firmly believed that he understood every word she had said. Moses was more precious to her than ever, and Aunt Nabby's laugh rippled out over the hill and met the children on their homeward way.

CHAPTER VI.

FOR some time past, and wholly unbeknown to Aunt Nabby, Joe had been a constant visitor at Squire Sslib's house. There seemed to be a mysterious charm that drew him there, and held him, even though he realised Aunt Nabby's hatred of the Squire, with which, it is needless to say, he had no sympathy.

Over in one corner of the Sslib kitchen, from behind an old secretary, there was the end of a black box protruding that very much resembled a fiddle-box. Joe had seen this for a long time, and often he would sit gazing at it with a look of longing in his eyes that went straight to Samantha Sslib's heart. Joe's eyes had always set her to trembling, though she could not have told you why, except that they seemed to stir some old chord that thrilled with a half-forgotten sorrow. Why was it? She asked herself the question each day after Joe had gone from the house, but it still remained unanswered.

At length one morning when he sat looking at the violin-box, Samantha had an inspiration. It suddenly occurred to her that Joe would like to see what was in the box. "Lor sakes alive," she said, "how stupid I be! Prob'ly he's been longin' fer that all this time." And she brought out the box and, opening it, placed the violin in his hands. He drew the bow across the strings and it gave out a groan that made Samantha shiver and cover her face with her hands.

"Yer mustn't play it 'less yer can play it well," she said to him. And then she moved near him and whispered with a white face :

"It hain't been out er that box fer sixteen years, Joe, never since my poor dear brother went away. He played it, Joe, played it so ter make yer tremble and quiver all over. Yer could hear the wind a-blowin' in the trees, and a-sighin' till yer sighed with it ; and then the rain seemed ter be patterin' down in a little April shower, till all of a sudden the sun seemed ter come out, and then the birds took ter singin', and everything seemed ter smile, and we smiled with him, and his eyes would look as no eyes on earth but his ever looked ter me, — as though

they saw things we never saw, and his ears heard sounds we couldn't hear. But he went away, Joe. The music didn't do him no good, and he was huntin' all the time and a-longin' fer something he didn't find, and we never heard from him since."

Joe scarcely seemed to hear a word she had spoken, so intent was he upon the instrument in his hands. How he had longed for this hour, when he could really hold the beloved thing in his own grasp, and learn to say on it all the things which the woods and fields had been whispering to him since he was old enough to listen to them. He drew the bow across the strings again, and as if some strange instinct led him, they sent forth a clear vibrant tone that filled his heart with joy, and intoxicated him so he knew nothing more that was going on around him. He tried all the different strings, and played the scales falteringly, feeling his fingers along the string with keen perception and perfect ear till the right tones were reached.

The sound of the violin pained Samantha, and Joe was quick to feel it. "May I take it away to practise on, Samantha?" he said, "away out in the woods? and when I can play it as your



“EVERY DAY HE BORROWED THE VIOLIN.”

brother did, then I will come and play it to you."

After this, every day he borrowed the violin and disappeared among the trees behind the house for an hour or more at a time. Aunt Nabby had missed him, but when she questioned him, he appeared so confused that she forbore to do so again. "Bless the boy," she always said, "he's pure gold. He's up ter somethin' good, and mebby I'll know what 'tis when the time comes right."

Samanthy Sslib, the Squire's sister, was a wee little woman, with pale yellow hair, and keen twinkling gray eyes. Her face was long and thin, and her teeth, which were large and pointed on the edges, protruded so that it was with difficulty she closed her mouth at all. It was a favourite pastime with the boys at the Mills to go to the prayer-meetings on summer nights, just to see Samanthy fall asleep and catch flies in her wide opened mouth. She had never been out of the village, and devoted all her days to keeping tidy her brother's home. But she was a faithful friend and a kind, loving neighbour, as any in the town would testify.

She had been watching Joe's delight in the old violin for several months, and now the days were coming cool and he could no longer play out-of-doors. She took the instrument from the case and held it close to her heart till the tears streamed over her cheeks. "Somehow, some-thin' tells me he would like ter have Joe have it!" she said, and then she replaced the fiddle lovingly in the box, and put on her sunbonnet preparatory to taking a walk.

Samanthy had not called upon Aunt Nabby since they were young girls together, and it was an astonishing sight now, to see her walk up to Aunt Nabby's door, with a feeble, faltering step, and rap with a hand that shook so she could scarcely control it sufficiently to make herself heard.

The door was opened at length by Kate, and to Samanthy's inquiry, "Is Miss Quest ter home?" Kate bowed low, and her great eyes searched the caller's face with the same look in them that always made Samanthy tremble, when she glanced at Joe. "Dear me," she said, under her breath, "how strange these childern be; they always flutter me, whenever I see them, though I hain't seen this little one

much." While she was pondering the subject, Kate ran to the stairway, and called, in a stage whisper, so loud that Samantha heard quite clearly every word she said :

" Aunt Nabby, come down ; you have a caller, and she looks for all the world jest like a monkey."

When Aunt Nabby entered the room, her caller was sitting with a strained white face, trying hard to keep back the tears that had moistened her lashes at sound of Kate's words.

" Children and fools, children and fools," she muttered, and Aunt Nabby, quite shocked at Kate, and grieved at the sight of another's suffering, forgot her professed hatred of the Sslib family, and extended a welcoming hand to Samantha, which reassured her, but made her forget her errand in the thought that Aunt Nabby was not angry with her after all.

For some time, the two women sat looking stupidly at each other, and then the door opened, and Joe walked in, followed by Kate. Both Aunt Nabby and Samantha held out their hands to the children, but Joe, after a moment of hesitation, walked straight over to Samantha, and laid his head on her shoulder.

Aunt Nabby could scarcely believe her senses at first, and then a nervous twitch of her mouth was all that betrayed how deeply she felt the slight. She looked at them calmly, it seemed to Joe, though no one but herself ever knew the struggle it cost her. Presently she smiled, and then she said: "Joe, and Kate, you may leave the room." Kate, who had stood quite alone all this time in the middle of the floor, turned, and taking Joe by the hand, led him away. It was then that Aunt Nabby looked at Samantha, and said:

"Seems ter me yer most swallered that boy with yer eyes, Samantha Sslib! Is the' anything I can do fer you?"

Samantha rolled the hem of her apron in a little round coil between her fingers as she spoke.

"Those is very attractive childern, Nabby, especially the boy."

Aunt Nabby gave her curls a violent toss this time, and said: "H'm! yes, the' must be some-thin' attractive here, ter some of the villagers, it appears ter me, fer the's one of 'em that never passes without craning his neck ter look, till I've most been tempted ter put out a sign sayin'

there wa'n't nothin' here fer sale, 'cause one man in town owned everything, curiosity inter the bargain! Yes, these is pretty childern, but what can I do fer you, Samantha?"

"That is jest what I come fer, ter tell yer that your boy Joe has had sech a longin' fer a fiddle, that I have been lendin' him the one over ter the house, that belonged ter — my brother that went away. I don't need ter go into details, Nabby, yer know the story, but Joe's been practisin' in the woods all summer, and now it's comin' cool, and he can't do that no longer, and I propose ter make him a present of that fiddle, if yer have no objections."

As Samantha was speaking, Aunt Nabby left her seat, and with her hands pressed to her forehead, moved slowly toward the speaker, till she stood close beside her, and placed a hand on her shoulder. Her face was deathly white, and her voice trembled so that it was hard to recognise her usual sweet tones. She tried twice to speak before a word came, and then she said :

"Say it ag'in, Samantha, what did yer say? Tell me ag'in that he's playin' on the same fiddle his — your brother used ter use. No, no,

I hain't done right, and blood is stronger than water," and Aunt Nabby burst out crying, much to Samantha's surprise.

When she finally became herself again, she looked up and said: "I've always felt, Samantha, that you and the Square was a-tryin' ter get them childern away from me, and yer sort of upset me, that's all. Yer can give him the fiddle, or anything else you want ter," and Samantha took her leave with a puzzled face.

"Must be Nabby's growin' old," she said to the Squire at tea that night, "cause I offered ter give that boy of hers the old fiddle, and she broke down and cried. Sort er strange, don't yer think so?" but the Squire only took on a rosy flush for answer, and ate so fast that he had finished and gone before she had time to give him his second helping of pumpkin pie.

When Joe came home from school that day he brought the fiddle with him, and laid it in Aunt Nabby's lap, with a perfect happiness shining on his face, that remained there till long after the lights were out in the little kitchen, and he was travelling through dream-land with Aunt Nabby's voice still ringing in his ears. "Read me something," he had said



“HE BROUGHT THE FIDDLE WITH HIM.”

to her, just at bedtime ; “ something sweet and sad, that I may hear the music of your voice in my dreams, and to-morrow night, after I have practised during the day down by the willow bushes, I will play to you, that you may dream of music too ; ” and a look of pride passed over his face. And now he was hearing again the words she had read to him from the old blue-covered scrap-book. She had read them many times before when he was less happy, but they never had sunken into his heart to make him feel their meaning as they did to-night.

“ Read it once again, ” he said, and she continued :

“ Say, have you seen my grandpapa ?
 He's old and lame and gray ;
 And his feet they totter along the road,
 Where he tries to find his way.
 My clothes are always warm and new ;
 His thin and worn have grown.
 They lead me when the path is rough
 But he must walk alone.
 I wonder, wonder why it is ?
 I'm 'fraid it's 'cause he's old.

.
 Say, have you seen my grandpapa ?
 His clothes are black and fine ;
 L. of C.

There's flowers all round his head, like those
He used to love of mine.
He never seems to smell the flowers
Nor open once his eyes,
To see how much we love him now
As pale and still he lies.
And oh! I wonder why they kept
Their kind words, flowers, and love,
For grandpa, till his sad old heart
Had gone to God above?
And why he wears that smile that says
I'm now no longer old.' ”

Joe had always cried when Aunt Nabby finished these lines, but to-night he said, thoughtfully :

“ When I am a man, Aunt Nabby, I shall not keep my flowers from you till you are dead, and I shall never let a chance for doing good escape me.” And so he was smiling in his sleep and hearing her words again, all unconscious that the morrow held a deeper grief than any he had ever known.

If Joe went to sleep smiling that night, as much could not be said of Aunt Nabby, for she held a fear locked in her heart that she dreaded to tell the children, and she dreaded also to see the morning dawn. The truth was, that Moses

was sick, and she feared fatally so. All the afternoon he had been suffering, and several times he had come and crawled into her lap, and cuddled down with such pleading glances that she felt he was saying, "What can you do to make me well?" And she had worked every spare moment over him, giving him much the same medicines that had been given to the little yellow dog, but with the same results, and all to no avail. Moses continued ill, and lay stretched out in a little basket on Aunt Nabby's bed. She thought it seemed providential that Joe's mind was so occupied with the violin that he forgot to look for Moses in his usual closet bed, and went to sleep with the instrument so close to him that he could reach out and touch it in the night with his hand.

When the first faint streak of dawn lighted the east, Aunt Nabby rose up in bed and gently moved the basket into the light. She spoke to Moses in a tone of exquisite love and tenderness, but there was no response. He lay cold and still, with his eyes closed and an unshelled peanut close beside him.

If Moses had been a human member of the family, Aunt Nabby's grief could scarcely have

been much deeper than it was ; but with her usual unselfishness, her first thought was for the children. Kate and Beth loved him dearly, but Joe was the one who would be crushed with sorrow, and she would try to keep it from him as long as possible, hoping that the new violin would so take up his mind that he would not miss the squirrel at first.

After breakfast she took the girls into her confidence, and told them she had decided that Moses should have a proper burial in the old family burying-ground, behind the house. Joe should be sent to the village on an errand, and while he was gone they would "lay out the squirrel proper, like folks," Aunt Nabby said, and take him down and bury him. "Take your fiddle along, Joe," they called after him, "and then you can stop and practise a little while, so you can play to us to-night," and he disappeared down the hill and across the pasture with the fiddle-box under his arm.

Aunt Nabby brought a salt-box from the shed, and lined it tastefully with a piece of soft white crape that she had treasured among old finery since her girlhood days. "Moses shall have it," she said, as she laid the sprays of au-

tumn woodbine leaves tenderly about his body. The flowers were gone, and these were the last leaves of the summer. She secured the cover to the box, and after wrapping it carefully in a soft white wool blanket, the mournful little procession threaded their way across the field to the graveyard.

Kate carried the box, for had not Moses belonged to Joe wholly? and this last ministry of love should be entrusted to no less tender hands than her own.

They were three solemn faces that passed through the old iron gate as it grated on its hinges to let them through, and grated again to close behind them. Aunt Nabby carried a small spade, and Beth a plain wooden slab, which she intended driving into the ground to mark the grave. "Let us bury him under the old beech-tree in the south corner, 'twill be warmer fer him," Aunt Nabby said, "and mebbly he'll like ter hear the nuts fallin' over his head."

They walked slowly across the burying-ground, till Kate, still holding all that was left of Moses in her faithful little arms, paused with a smothered cry, that was hushed in the look of awe overspreading her face. She placed the box

upon the ground and lay down close beside it, quite overcome by what she saw. There at the foot of the old beech-tree a tiny grave had just been opened, and on a simple slab of wood at its head were written the words in Joe's handwriting :

“ For the angel of God upturned the sod.”

“ Surely, this is the burial of Moses,” Aunt Nabby said, with bated breath. “ Let us lay him in the grave.”

It was Kate who started to lower the little box to its last resting-place, and just as it reached the bottom, and they were about to return the sods to their former greenness and order, a wild, weird strain from over their heads caused them all to pause and look upward into the branches of the old beech. It was the voice of a violin, that spoke to them as plainly as words could ever have spoken. When once it had attracted them by its loud weeping, the voice gladdened their hearts by a soft chirp, which was surely no other than that of Moses when first he came to them, a wee baby squirrel. All three of the listeners smiled involuntarily, and Aunt Nabby wiped away her tears. But even as they smiled

they heard the call of the old mother-squirrel, and knew that she was pining for freedom, and then for the little ones so cruelly kept from her.

“We never'd oughter done it,” Aunt Nabby said, and then they heard the wind sighing till it seemed to shake the old kitchen walls, just as it did in dreary winter days; and now a hurry and a scramble that made them see once more Moses flying about the kitchen floor after his tail.

“I'm glad he's snug and warm,” Aunt Nabby said, smiling once again, but almost instantly the wind lulled and the rain began to patter like a gentle summer shower, and Aunt Nabby looked up in the branches of the old tree expecting to see the sun shut in. Yes, the sky was cold and gray, and the leaves, that should be a vivid green, were sere and brown. But the rain pattered on, and now she could hear the birds twitter above the storm, which presently grew fierce, and the winds were souging in the grass and leaves, and all the world was mourning with the three tearful listeners beside the open grave. There was a hint of vivid lightning that shot with a shriek across the sky,

and then a sound of thunder growing faint and fainter still, till only the birds and rain-drops were left, and even the twittering seemed so high in the heavens that it was scarcely audible. The rain fell gently, gently, then ceased altogether, till the music and the storm went out like the light of day on a summer sea, and they knew that with it in Joe's fancy had gone out the frail little life that had gladdened their home for several years.

Three quivering breaths were drawn as Joe crept slowly down from the old tree and laid the fiddle on the ground beside the open grave. His head was bare as he stooped to cover the little box and replace the sod. "He was mine, Aunt Nabby, and it is my work to do," was all he said, and then the four returned to the house in silence. Kate glanced reverently at the fiddle-box under his arm, but Aunt Nabby's face was white and troubled, with a grief which lay deeper than that of Moses's death.

"I shouldn't ought er done it," she said, as she closed the gate gently behind the children. "Secrets is bothersome things, and blood is stronger than water. Joe must have knowed Moses was dead, and missed him all the time,

but insted of cryin' about, like the rest of us, he jest let the fiddle talk fer him. I might er knowed how 'twould be!"

No wonder there had been a look of triumph on Joe's face when he said, "I will play for you to-morrow night, that you, too, may dream of music."

CHAPTER VII.

THERE was a wave of excitement passing over Putnam Mills, and on this wave the first City Boarder made her advent. And of all things, the very last person to open her house for any such purpose was Samantha Sslib! But stranger things happen in life than in fiction, and true it was, that a young lady from the city was stopping at the Sslib house. Aunt Nabby had never seen her, but she listened to the news of her presence there with a crimson glow burning on each cheek.

“I wonder who she is, Joe; do you know, and do they know her?”

“I don't know,” was his reply; “but they said at the store last night that the Square had opened his house for a regular summer sortment, and they guessed he'd get enough of it. The postmaster corrected them, and said they meant summer resort, and that the Squire had brought

the girl home with him from Portland on his last trip there."

Aunt Nabby tossed her curls and Joe ran away to school, but she rocked very hard as she sat under the old elm in the front yard, wondering "just what sort of a creetur this summer boarder was." She was full of curiosity about everything that concerned the Sslib house, despite her professed dislike for them, and she was talking to the calf, which was hitched so near her, that he reached over occasionally to chew the hem of her apron.

"I wonder what Square Sslib will do next," she said. "I'd jest like ter git a squint at that girl from the city; don't see one very often," but her words were cut short by a bellow from the calf, as he jumped the length of his rope, and stood perfectly still, with all four feet spread wide apart, and head down, as if challenging the approaching object. There was something, which Aunt Nabby thought looked like a woman, bearing straight down upon them, and sitting atop and astride of what she took to be a bar of steel above two wheels that were arranged, as she afterward said, "like the Squire's horses, when he drove 'tantrum,'" as all the

villagers called it. Straight on top of the steel bar, the strange girl-woman rode, with her knees moving up and down, up and down, till she came to a place where the front wheel stuck, and then, raising her body from the seat, she spurred with all her might, till the vehicle, first with a shiver and then a thrill, went "wibbly-wabbly" up the path, straight toward Aunt Nabby and the calf.

"That contrary thing seemed ter be alive," Aunt Nabby afterward said; "and jest like an obstinate creetur, went exactly where she didn't want it ter go. She was terrible red in the face, and didn't look as if she was enjoyin' herself very much, and when she tried ter turn out past the elm-tree, the pesky thing jest wibbled t'other way, and run straight inter the tree. She put out her hand ter steer it away, and I vum if she didn't run, just as fast as she could stiver, inter the calf. Reminded me, fer all the world, of Darius Green, fer away with a beller our calf fled, and then he turned, too, and showed his blood, fer he kicked the spokes in them wheels till they was all bent up, 'fore she could git it out from under his heels. When she picked up the thing and walked away ter

set it up against the elm-tree, she was the most curious lookin' creetur! Why, she stood as if she had been broken in two, once, right at the waist line, and when they fastened her together again, they made a mistake and put her chest farther forward than it ought to be, and her arms was set ter swingin' jest like two pendalums on a clock, that was tipped so't they couldn't help swingin', when once they got ter goin'. I looked at her, with all my eyes, but I couldn't make out whether she was a child or a woman. From her knees up, she looked like a woman, but from there down she looked like a child, till yer got to her shoes, and then she looked, fer all the world, as if she had borrowed her father's. I was so surprised I forgot myself, and said, aloud:

“ ‘Well, I s'pose yer lucky ter have a father ter borrer shoes of. That's more'n I've got!’

“She jest burst out laughin' at that, and I got up courage ter ask her if she was a child or a woman, and she laughed again, and said, in the sweetest voice I ever heard, ‘Oh, I'm a young lady, you know, but we all have to wear short skirts when we ride bicycles.’

“I wus dumbfounded.

“ ‘ Well, of all things, is that a bicycle? I’ve heard tell of them, but I never seen one before. Don’t manage themselves very well, do they, now? Do they always get under the feet of things that kicks the hardest? ’Cause if they do, I should certainly want my life insurance raised ’fore I got onter one.’ ”

Aunt Nabby looked searchingly at the girl, and then ventured to offer a suggestion.

“ Did yer know yer belt’s droppin’ down in front, and a-ridin’ right up in the middle of yer back? ”

But the caller only looked a little scornful and pushed the silver girdle down in front, till Aunt Nabby thought it almost reached her knees. “ Lor’ sakes,” she said, “ I didn’t know what ter make of her, anyway. Her hair was all fallin’ over her face, but when I told her of it, she only run her fingers through it ter make it lay clean over ter her eyebrows. ‘ It’s a pompydoor,’ she said, but I didn’t know what that was, and so I changed the subject. She was a terrible bright, pert little thing, and when she moved around I smelled spring violets and thought of all sort er things that was nice. But there was somethin’ I could not understand,

and that was the strange rustle about her clothes every time she moved. I stood it till it nettled me, and roused all my curiosity, and then I couldn't stand it no longer, an' I jest up and asked her what it was.

“Upon that she pulled up her dress, and the whole wrong side of it was lined with silk! and then that was nothin', but there was a lovely changeable petticoat that shimmered all the colours of the rainbow. That floored me! I only held up my hands in surprise, till I got my breath, and then I told her that I had been brought up ter think that I was pooty lucky if I got silk ter wear on the outside, an' asked her if she knew her dress was on the wool side out. She laughed again, ser sweet I had ter laugh too, an' then she told me she come from the Square's house, and that she was his city boarder!” Here Aunt Nabby usually paused, for her feelings overpowered her, but it is pleasant to relate that at that critical moment the young lady came to the rescue, by asking her name, and saying that her own was “Miss Fay,” and that she hoped to be in their beautiful village for some time to come. “Will you give me a drink of water, please?”

It was then that Aunt Nabby revived, and found her tongue and her usual curiosity.

“Come right in,” she said. “Here’s some fresh water I jest drewed from the well. Come from the Square’s, did yer? Well, won’t yer take off yer things?” Aunt Nabby had failed to note that Miss Fay wore no outside wraps.

“Be they washin’ at Samantha’s ter-day? I jest got mine out, done the coloured ones, but hain’t got round ter the white ones yet.” Here she paused to pull a curl over her forehead, and drew her features into a sideways tangle that the village boys called “Nabby’s snuff.” She was full of curiosity, and pursued her questions as if she feared her caller would vanish before answering them.

“Did Samantha tell yer about our tame squirrels, Dick and Moses? Why, they used ter come here fer miles ter see them squirrels play. Yes, Joe he ketched Moses and Dick when they wa’n’t more’n a week old, and Moses slept right under his arm all night, jest so,” and she folded her hand caressingly under her own arm. “He allus thought more of Joe than he did of me, and Lor’ sakes! Miss Fay, I dunno as yer’ll believe what I’m goin’ ter tell yer, but

I hain't goin' ter tell nothin' that ain't true. Well, sir, all the time Moses was alive, he slept in the closet in Joe's room, and I couldn't take a pair of Joe's pants out er the room. It was all right if I wanted ter make up the bed, or tidy the room, but jest let me tech anything of Joe's, and that squirrel would jump right at me. Had any green stuff off'n the farm at the Square's yet? Some radishes? I don't like them, but Moses used ter like 'em, and we used ter walk clear over ter the Mills ter get 'em for him.

“ Yes, Miss Fay, I come from the same family of Quests that has the little buryin'-ground down there in the field back er the barn. My grandfather built this house here, but he used ter live in a log cabin, down close beside where he set out the little graveyard. I dare say if he'd 'a' thought he'd ever 'a' built this house, he'd 'a' planted the cemetery so 'twould have been closer ter the house. Yer see, my Uncle Theodore, he used ter live here after grandpa died. Lor' ! this house is ninety odd year old. I wish yer could have seen it as they tell about it in them days ; they kept the front hall fer a wood-shed, and that room next the road had jest a floor for finishin'.

Uncle Theodore's two sisters lived with him, and Lor' sakes! I don't know what ailded them girls, for though they must have been sixty year old, they was scairt ter sleep alone, and so they and Uncle Theodore all bunked in one room. Their bed was over in the corner next the entry, and his next the road. Square Sslib used ter be fond er going berryin'; has he took you? Moses, he liked berries and peanuts, and Lor' sakes! yer jest ought ter been here one day, when the' was a feller came here a-sellin' spectacles. I told him my eyes was all right, but perhaps he could sell Moses some glasses, and he picked up his little box and folleyed me inter the room with his face a-shinin'. I wish yer could have seen Moses step out ter meet him, he set up so straight and pert, and laugh, — why, I came nigh never gettin' that man out of the room. In two weeks' time he come back, and he says, says he, 'Twas a good job yer done, foolin' me the way yer did. I don't resent it one bit. I went home and told my wife of it, and she died a-laughin'. 'Twas a good joke!' Don't hurry, Miss Fay. I wish yer'd come often. Is — is the Square ter home now? I hain't seen him drive past lately."

“No, he has gone to the city for a month. Thank you for your kindness. I will come to see you again.”

“Gone fer a month!” and Aunt Nabby dropped into a chair. “Then I must wait till he gets home. I had made up my mind ter tell him before another sun went down. This strain on my conscience is a-killin’ me. Seems as if I couldn’t stand it another day.”

CHAPTER VIII.

THREE weeks later a sudden change had come to the Quest household. Aunt Nabby had been uneasy ever since the day Miss Fay had visited her. Something was troubling her, and finally she tied on her bonnet one rainy morning, and called upon Samantha Sslib. The result of this call was that Samantha came over to stay with the children a few days while Aunt Nabby went to Portland. She was tired and nervous, Samantha told the children, and needed a rest. Miss Fay had also gone back to her home, but she had left one sad and lonely little heart behind her. From the first moment when Joe had met her walking in the woods, and listened to the music of her voice and the soft rustling of her silken skirts, and noted the subtle grace of her every moment, he had been a changed boy. He dreamed all day long now, and had even discarded the old fiddle for hours at a time. There was a broken chain of mem-

ories reviving within him, that, dream as he might, he could not link together. Some tie bound her to his past, and now that she was gone, he still heard the delicious music of her voice, and the swish of her silken skirts. "What do I hear when you move?" he had said to her; "a sound that is soft and nice; I like it. And who are you?" She laughed half sadly, and Joe seemed to hear the warble of the song-bird, the babbling of the summer brook, and to feel the balmy flower-scented breeze from the meadow, whenever he recalled that laugh. And then she had shaken out her silken robes, and he had gazed long and wonderingly at the soft tints of opal and pink, while his heart passed out of his keeping into the sheen of their rustling folds.

For days after Fay went home, Joe seemed very unhappy, and finally, the next morning following Aunt Nabby's departure, he was missing. The belief that the strange girl could help him solve the mystery of his past had taken such strong hold upon him that he had gone to find her.

The morning light was breaking, and a faint tinge from the rising sun was visible in the

east. All nature seemed to rejoice, and birds hopped from bough to bough, and, twittering like babies just learning to talk, seemed to gain confidence in the sunlight, and broke forth into joyous song that echoed through the woods and meadows, and caused a dreaming boy under a hay-stack close by to open his eyes and look about him. A soft breeze fanned the boughs of an old oak over his head, till the leaves rustled like the swish of a silken robe.

The boy's lips quivered, and he whispered: "Fay, my Fay, are you there? Have you come to tell me — to tell me all? I have thought I heard you time and again, but it's always some one else," and he burst into tears. "It's been a long time since Joe left home," he continued, "and his heart is sad and his body sore. Twice yesterday I thought I heard the soft rustle of her skirts, and then I lost it in the crowd, and there's a strange stiff feeling in my cheeks that feels as if I never laughed, and never could again. There's something heavy pulling at Joe's heart, and he most wishes he'd stayed at home — or had the old fiddle with him." And he arose and walked on toward the town.

At twilight of that summer evening Squire Sslib walked slowly up to the lobby of a vaudeville theatre, and after some deliberation bought a ticket and entered. Now something very strange and almost incredible happened, directly after this, for the Squire had no sooner disappeared inside than Aunt Nabby, peering cautiously from behind a tree where she was sitting on a rustic seat, arose and, following in his footsteps, bought a ticket and went in and seated herself directly behind the Squire. There was a look of pale determination on her face, as if she did not intend he should escape her this time, till she had spoken the words she so long had wished to say.

While Aunt Nabby was fanning herself, with her eyes riveted on the bald head just in front of her, instead of the stage, a pale-faced boy standing in the lobby, and attracted by the sound of the orchestra, had stepped to the box-office and cheerfully paid his last penny for an entrance. He stood under the gallery, just behind Aunt Nabby and the Squire, but he saw only the stage, and drank in the music with a delight that made him oblivious to everything else. The curtain arose, and a girl so light and

graceful that she seemed to be not of earth glided forward and took her place over a glass set into the floor of the stage, just behind the footlights. The strains of the orchestra swelled into a wild allegro as she swung her silken skirts about her and was lost in the grace of the ballet. Joe's heart stood still. Every movement of the lithe body, every fold of its shimmering drapery, wrapped him in an ecstasy of delight and pain. He had found her at last, his beautiful Fay, but how could this dancing girl be one and the same with the Squire's boarder, and how could she tell him of his past? The lights changed. Now her draperies glowed all in rainbow tints, now a crimson light, warm and alluring, and now — what did he see? Surely there was smoke, and then, oh, horror unutterable! Fay seemed dancing in living flames. They leaped and curled about her like hungry fiends, while she danced and smiled and waved her silken skirts. He saw the frightful sight reflected in a world of mirrors around her, until his tired brain was bewildered with their horrors. He could neither move nor speak, and then — Fay seemed swallowed up in flames and the darkness of night was over all.

When the lights were turned on, those sitting near the door were startled at the white, girlish face of a boy who had fainted and fallen forward on to the seat in front of him.

The noise of the ushers bearing him out attracted the attention of Aunt Nabby and the Squire at the same moment. When the latter turned around, his eye fell on Nabby first, and then upon Joe's white face, and he sprang from his seat to follow him, wholly unmindful of the fact that she was walking hurriedly at his side. Joe was lying upon the floor in the lobby, and Aunt Nabby bent lovingly over him, to feel for his heart and caress his slender hands, and then she turned to the ushers, saying :

“He is *ours* ; leave him with us,” and her eye met the Squire's wondering gaze without a waver.

“Square Sslib, will yer call a carriage and come with Joe and me to my room? I've somethin' ter say to yer, that yer may not be sorry ter hear. Somethin' I've come all the way from Putnam Mills ter say.” Not another word was spoken till they had entered Aunt Nabby's room, and when she opened her mouth to speak he held up a warning finger.

“I’ve something ter say ter you, Nabby,” he said, “before yer have yer say ter me, fer I feel that I have a right in all three of them childern of yours, that yer don’t know nothin’ about, an’ I ought ter have confessed long ago,” and he drew a soiled envelope from his pocket and placed it in her hands.

“I found it lyin’ in the road, early the next mornin’, an’ I tried ter give it back ter yer, an’ I come an’ knocked at yer door, but yer wouldn’t let me in.”

Aunt Nabby looked falteringly at the envelope, and saw with surprise that it was directed simply, “To God.”

“I found it,” the Squire continued, guiltily, “an’ I never could give it up after that first day. I’ve carried it close ter me in my vest pocket, and it has kinder pricked my conscience and kep’ me a-doin’ the best I knowed how ever since. I loved them childern before, but I’ve had a double interest in ’em all three ever since. Yer don’t mind my tellin’ yer, Nabby, that Elder Parsons is still a-livin’ on my best farm, an’ me a-payin’ his taxes fer nothin’ ever since I read that letter ; and that the’s a snug sum of money in the bank fer Samantha, all on ac-

count of the same. The's tender spots and places in my heart that I never knowed till I read that letter of Beth's, and so the's a snug little sum in the bank fer her, too, if yer willin' ter accept it."

Aunt Nabby had stood pale and trembling while the Squire was speaking, and Joe, who was quite recovered before they reached the house, lay with wide-opened eyes, scarcely able to comprehend what so strangely was taking place before him.

Aunt Nabby raised a warning finger, till the Squire, beginning to understand that she wished him to give her a chance to speak, stopped with a sentence half finished, as she drew a letter from her bosom and placed it in his hands.

"Take that," she said; "it has burnt my conscience till I couldn't carry it another day, and I have come here ter find yer."

Squire Sslib glanced at the address. It was clearly directed to "Master Joe Sslib," in a handwriting that brought memories of bygone days teeming to the Squire's brain. His hand trembled visibly, but he read the letter through, and placed it calmly in Joe's hands. "Read it, my boy, it is yours, from your father written

when he was dying, and committin' yer ter my care fer the rest of yer life, or till yer are old enough ter care fer yourself."

Joe's eyes sparkled with excitement, but he was too weak to understand what it all meant, till the Squire proceeded to explain to him as follows :

"'Tis only to-day, my boy, that I have learned you and Kate are the childern of my brother, who left us so many years ago. The letter explains how he had placed you in the care of a young sister of your dead mother, and had left her money to take care of yer, tellin' her ter give yer ter me when she found me. That aunt was the dancin' girl you saw ter-night, and the one who wrote ter me fer summer board, and has been with Samantha and me all summer. When she was at the house, me and Samantha suspicioned, by somethin' she said, that she knew more about you childern than she was willin' ter tell, and I started off ter this town ter foller some clue she give me without meanin' ter. This mornin' I found her, an' she owned it all up, but said she thought yer had been with me all this time, and that she sent yer here by a friend, who stole yer money and run away.

P'raps its true, and p'raps 'tain't, but, Nabby, I must thank you fer all yer lovin' care of these childern. Yer've brought 'em up better'n ever I could, and it's all jest right," and he held out his hand to her, and she took it in her trembling grasp.

"It's the queerest mix-up I ever seen, Square, but things is a-comin' out all fer the best," and she brushed away a tear of happiness. "If yer brother left yer, Square, fer his fiddle, you've got the childern in his place, and 'pears ter me they more than make up the loss;" but even as she spoke her chin quivered at thought of what it would mean to her to give up the children.

The Squire saw and understood, and a mischievous smile flitted over his face, as he said simply, "We'll let bygones be bygones, Nabby."

There was silence for a moment, and then the Squire, coming close to Aunt Nabby, took her hand in his, and she allowed it to remain there.

"The's somethin' more I have ter tell yer, Nabby," he whispered. "Do yer remember the night yer saw me help a girl from the evenin'

stage and lead her up the lane ter the seat under the great oak-tree? And when yer came upon us her head was laid on my shoulder, an' yer passed us by without speakin'. I tried ter explain it one night, Nabby, but yer wouldn't listen, and then I promised afterward ter keep the secret, and I couldn't tell yer. That girl was my brother's wife, and the mother of Kate and Joe. Their father had married her without the consent or knowledge of his folks an' went away and left her for months. She was in want, and came on ter me, ter tell me her troubles, and when yer passed us, she had fainted and lay on my shoulder fer support. I've carried the weight of her little form and her grief fer all these years, Nabby, and now if it hadn't been fer her children I never could have explained ter you. Shall we let bygones be bygones now?"

A heavy frost lay over the earth, and the leafless twigs of the woodbine tapped in vain at the dark windows of the old Quest house, for it was closed.

Nancy Abby Pamily Quest had become Mrs. Sslib! On this dreary November night, the

same wind that tossed the naked branches of the woodbine hurried on down the hill, dimpling the waters of the mill-pond as it passed, and blew its way through the crevices of an uncurtained window in the back of the Squire's big, airy kitchen, where it gently tossed Beth's hair as she sat close to the window studying her arithmetic lesson for the morrow. She was radiantly happy now, for she looked into the future with the certainty that her fondest hopes were to be fulfilled. She was going to the academy at Jefferson, in the spring.

Over by the fire, Samantha sat with a dreamy look of delight on her pale face, for Joe was at her feet with the old violin in his hands, and a soft ripple, like the sound of distant waters, mingling with the song of birds, filled the room. He always played sitting so, at Samantha's feet, saving now and then on a clear bright morning, when he stole away to climb the beech-tree over Moses's grave, where he poured out the burden of all his past grief to the little ears that he fully believed heard and sympathised with him. But Joe was supremely happy now, for he had solved the mystery of the past, and looked into the future with a delight akin to Beth's, for he,

too, was going to college as soon as he was fitted to enter. There were other delights which were his, too, for out in the Squire's warm barn, with their heads tucked beneath their wings, were Bidly Creamer, Trap, and the old drake, with all his grown-up family, for, in short, all the Quest household had moved over to the Squire's with Aunt Nabby, whose cup of happiness was now full.

"I cast my bread out on the water," she said, "when I took them blessed childern, and it come back ter me a heap more'n I cast out."

Kate was cuddled in the Squire's arms half asleep, but when Aunt Nabby spoke, she opened her eyes and shot a mischievous glance from her to the Squire, as she said :

"I guess Aunt Nabby's changed her mind, 'cause once when I told her that the Square was awful nice, she looked so mad that I never dared ter tell her so again."

THE END.

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